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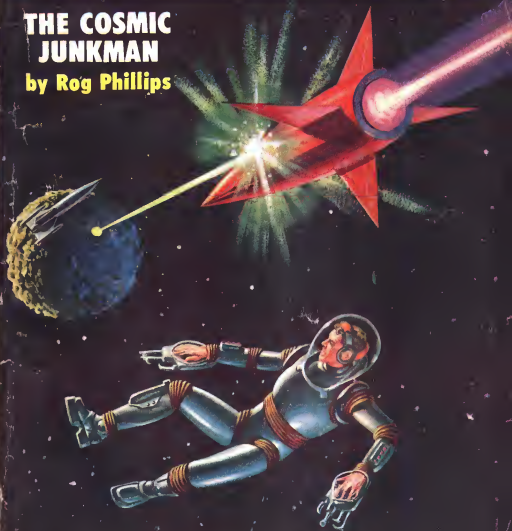
STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

DECEMBER, 1953

35¢

THE COSMIC JUNKMAN

by Rog Phillips



Introducing the

AUTHOR



★
Evan Hunter



I WAS born and raised in New York City, and the last thing I wanted to be was a writer. In fact, my chief ambition was to become a cartoonist, and I majored in art all through high school, won a scholarship to the Art Student's League and later to Cooper Union, and thought of everything in terms of art: namely with a picture frame around it. In 1944, the Navy decided it was time to put me on a destroyer in the Pacific. I began writing letters, and I struck up a correspondence with an old buddy who wanted to be a writer. One day, the buddy sent along a sketch of himself at the typewriter. He'd drawn it. I can still remember it quite clearly. I looked at it and said, "Why he can draw better than I can!" That was when I be-

gan reading his letters carefully. After much deliberation, I decided that I could *write* better than he could, so I decided to switch ambitions.

When I left the Navy, I started and finished Hunter College (which I did not found, unfortunately), this time as an English major. Between my Navy discharge and my first sale, I've been a piano player in the Borscht Belt (I once sat in with a Japanese band in a geisha house on a dare), a lobster salesman, a telephone dispatcher, a teacher in a vocational high school, and an editor. I've sold quite a bit of science fiction, including a juvenile novel to the John C. Winston Company (*Find The Feathered Serpent*); also several hard-boil-

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of Science
and Fantasy*

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DECEMBER 1953

Volume 4

Number 11

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Editor

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Managing Editor

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Art Director

January Issue On Sale

November 27th

Front cover by Malcolm Smith, illustrating THE COSMIC JUNKMAN. Interior illustrations by W. E. Terry and H. W. McCauley. Cartoons by Vogel, Law, Kohler, and Schaffy. Astronomical photo, back cover, courtesy Mt. Wilson and Palomar Observatories.

The Editorial

ACTIVE science fiction fandom absorbs so much criticism — and disdain — from those standing on the *outside*, that when a particularly noteworthy project initiated by a fan reaches fruition it gives us a deep sense of satisfaction—and pride—for all of fandom. Such a project has recently been completed by Gerry de la Ree of 277 Howland Avenue, River Edge, New Jersey.

ABOUT a month or so ago we received a form questionnaire from Gerry, which we promptly filled out and returned. The questions were simply stated: 1. *Do you believe that interplanetary travel will eventually be accomplished?* 2. *If your answer to the above question was "yes", in what year do you think the first unmanned missile will be successfully landed on the moon?* 3. *In what year do you think the first manned flight to the moon or another planet will be attempted?* 4. *What country, organization, or group do you think will sponsor the first interplanetary flight?* 5. *Do you believe atomic power will be used to propel the first passenger-carrying space craft?* 6. *If not, what type of fuel do you think will be used?*

WE thought little more about the "survey" until we received a well-reproduced and bound

booklet from Gerry, giving the results of the survey and a list of the contributors. Sixty-five names were listed, many of them top scientists. Men of renown, such as Dr. Werner von Braun, Chief of U. S. Guided Missiles Development Division; Dr. Fred L. Whipple, Chairman of Harvard University Department of Astronomy; Dr. Heinz Haber, Department of Engineering, U.C.L.A., and many others of equal eminence in the world of science. Prominent science fiction editors and writers were also represented, and while the latter are strictly laymen, they all have a firm background in science and/or science fiction. We take some trouble to emphasize the foregoing to impress the fact that the statistics garnered from the project are not to be in any sense sneered at; the participants for the main part were men who are "in the know" and their answers may be taken as near prophecy.

THE answers to the questions were as follows:

- | | |
|-------------------|-------|
| 1. Yes: | 98.4% |
| No: | 1.6% |
| 2. Prior to 1975: | 71.4% |
| After 1975: | 12.7% |
| No Opinion: | 15.9% |
| 3. Prior to 1990: | 73.0% |
| After 1990: | 14.3% |
| No Opinion: | 12.7% |
| 4. U.S.A.: | 54.7% |

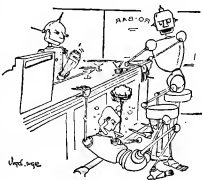
- | | |
|------------------------|-------|
| <i>U.S.A. or USSR:</i> | 14.3% |
| <i>International:</i> | 11.1% |
| <i>No Opinion:</i> | 14.3% |
| <i>Others:</i> | 5.6% |
| 5. <i>Yes:</i> | 42.9% |
| <i>No:</i> | 49.2% |
| <i>Partially:</i> | 6.3% |
| <i>No Opinion:</i> | 1.6% |
6. Suggested fuels ranging from chemical propellants to atomic energy.

THE booklet contains detailed comments by many of the contributors, and while this survey perhaps does not represent the line of thinking of the scientific or science fictional world as a whole, it does reflect opinions from apparently qualified segments of each. Certainly enough to impress us (and not because we were a contributor—in spite of it!) with the fact that space flight is thought of seriously these days—and we've always considered the thought as father to the deed . . .

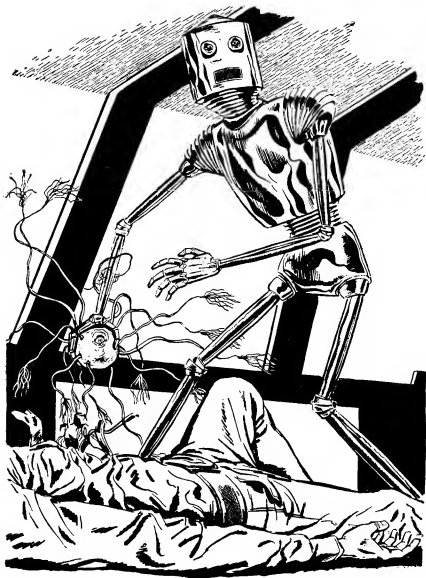
IN any event, Gerry de la Ree deserves a great deal of credit for publishing this survey. Now that it is published, we ask ourselves, why didn't somebody do this before? Science fiction magazine editors in particular (and we shamefully are included) missed the boat on this one in not having the foresight to conduct such an informative poll. So our hat's off to Gerry, and this should prove once and for all that active science fiction fans take their hobby seriously! . . . Any readers who would like to get a copy of the booklet can contact Gerry de la Ree for details; we do not know if it is available as this editorial goes to press,

but a letter would get you the answer. And if you can obtain a copy, we know you'll find it as interesting as we did.

TO get back to the strictly fictional world of science, we're pleased to announce that next month marks the return of a great Madge favorite—Kris Neville. You all recall his great novels, SPECIAL DELIVERY and EARTH ALERT! The January issue adds another title to your list of favorites, PERIL OF THE STARMEN. There's a fine cover by Bill Terry (who has painted covers for the other Neville stories) and this new combination will also meet with your approval, we're sure. So watch for the January issue—or better yet, turn to page 162 and take advantage of a real money-saving offer with a subscription to Madge. You'll get your January issue immediately, and subsequent issues weeks ahead of newsstand publication. What are you waiting for! with



"Stop acting like a man!"



After the war Earth stored away its robot armies or sold them for scrap—because fighting machines were dangerous. But more deadly was—

THE COSMIC JUNKMAN

By

Rog Phillips

Log Report:—

Fleet: Alpha Aquilae; 20,080 surviving ships. Flagship ROVER.

Personnel: human;

*Fleet Admiral William A. Ford
Vice Admiral Paul G. Belcross
robot;*

2,649,366 (Ids. appended)

passenger: (human);

*Generalissimo Vilbis (prisoner
under w.c.a.)*

Dates May 7, 4765; flight formation arrow, speed 1,700,000 m.p.s.

*Scheduled date of arrival at
Earth: June 11, 4766*

Distance from Earth on Earth-Aquilae axis: ten light years.



“RUMMY,” Vilbis said, reaching through the hand-hole in the inch thick laminated glass wall of his prison and spreading his cards on the table. His lips formed into the cruel haughty smile that had been his trademark to billions of humans for almost half a century. His wide-set black eyes mocked the other two players.

“Well, well,” Paul Belcross smirked. “I see now why you lost the war, Vilbis. Isn’t that a six of diamonds in your heart sequence?”

The black eyes glanced down. The long-fingered hand began to retrieve the cards, then paused. Vilbis’ almost classic features darkened with anger. With an effort he became calm. A secret inner amusement made little lights in his eyes as he looked up at his two captors again.

“You know,” Bill Ford said thoughtfully, “sometimes I think you must have some kind of an ace up your sleeve. You don’t seem at all concerned that this is your last trip. The War Crimes Court—then death by hanging.” Bill frowned. “Could be you figured the angle I’ve always worried about. The Federation is always too quick to demobilize the robots after a war. Some day some punk like you is going to take that into consideration. He’s going to sur-

render, but have a reserve space navy waiting until Earth is without defenses, then take over and win.”

“Too bad I didn’t think of that when I could have done something about it,” Vilbis said too cheerfully.

“Maybe you did think of it,” Bill said. “When we get home I’m going to suggest we keep the Aquilae Fleet mobilized for at least ten years.”

“You know they won’t do that,” Paul Belcross said. “They’re more afraid of the robots than they are of attack. So am I, actually.”

“We’re just afraid of what they could do if they got free,” Bill said. “Their potential intelligence is greater than human. If they overcame their built-in instinct for obedience to human command they could—why think of what our two million robots could do!”

“Why all this discussion of robots?” Vilbis said. “They’re just dogs. Not even that. They were dogs for six months of their existence before their brains were transplanted into synthegell fluid by the mind transplant machine.” His eyes took on a far away look. His voice became regretful. “I had a hundred thousand scientists working on that problem. If the mind of one dog could be transplanted into synthegell without destroying the dog’s brain there would be no limit to the production of

robot brain cartridges. If we could have licked that problem I'd have won the war."

"If!" Paul spat. "You're a renegade Earthman. I'm putting in my application to be the one to hang you as soon as we get home."

"How do you—" Vilbis clamped his lips closed and scooped up his cards.

"How do we know we'll get home?" Bill Ford said. "Is that what you were going to say?"

Vilbis looked at his cards casually. "No," he said absently. "I was going to say how do you expect to play cards and talk at the same time?"

A raucous blast exploded in the room. Bill and Paul stared at each other in surprise. Vilbis smiled.

Bill leaped across the room to the cm board. He jabbed at buttons. A giant screen lit up, showing a spaceship. Smaller screens lit up, revealing robot ship commanders.

"Look at that ship, Paul," Bill said. "You know them all. Aquilanean, Centaurian, Cygnian. It isn't any known type—and with a war just over, there hasn't been time to mass-produce new types." He jabbed at a button. "All ships," he said. "All ships. Defense formation five. Five. Operation three. Three." He listened to the repeats.

PAUL Belcross had leaped to the huge tri-di sphere and turned it on. Seconds later both men, Vilbis forgotten but watching with bright eyes, were studying the small dots in the tri-di. The flight formation in the shape of a giant arrow was quickly changing shape as the fleet formed a defensive sphere around the flagship and its human occupants. The *Rover* was the only bright blue dot. The others were red.

But now other dots were materializing at the outer fringe of the tri-di, too many new dots to count. Approaching ships.

Across the room a voice from a loudspeaker was saying, "Eighty seconds to contact. No response. No response."

"Another second and they'll be within range," Paul said.

"God!" Bill's voice exploded. His eyes were on the large area of the tri-di where ships had abruptly ceased to exist.

"Something's wrong with the tri-di," Paul said. "No weapon could do that."

"Nothing's wrong with the tri-di," Bill said sharply. "And we don't have that kind of weapon. They're something alien. Have to be. Some other galaxy. There's always been that possibility."

A rapidly repeated pip-pip-pip came from the cm board. Bill leaped to it. A light, under a

small screen showing a robot, was blinking. He pressed the button. The robot saluted. His Id was stamped across his chrome chest, with four gold stars after it. "We will be destroyed, sir," it said. "Would suggest Flagship *Rover* change course forty degrees at eight o'clock and go on without fleet."

"You're giving orders?" Bill said, his face going pale and his eyes narrowing—not at the impending defeat, but at this sign of independent initiative in a robot.

"It's your only chance for survival," the robot said. "It must be done at once."

"Place yourself under ship arrest and give me the next in command," Bill ordered sharply. The screen went blank. "That's mutiny!" he shouted, unbelieving.

Vilbis, behind his glass wall, laughed aloud.

"Not mutiny," Paul said. "They are gone. All our ships are gone!" His voice conveyed the incredulous horror in his mind.

In the tri-di there was only the bright blue dot, and the thousands of approaching ships of the enemy.

The next instant the ship lurched violently.

"They're boarding!" Bill shouted. "But they aren't going to get Vilbis back alive."

He leaped to a locker and opened it with clumsy fingers, bringing

out a g.i. raygun. He turned to leap toward the glass wall separating him from Vilbis. Before he could take a step a large section of a bulkhead vanished in smoke. For a brief instant Bill and Paul stared with unbelieving eyes at what entered the room.

Then they died.

"Stop!" The word exploded from Vilbis's lips. He stared at the cooked flesh that had been his captors. Then his eyes lifted to the jagged hole in the bulkhead.

"You fools!" he spat. His lips curled with cold anger. "Where do you hope to get two other humans now?"

THE demobilization station trailed the Earth, a million and a half miles behind and in the same orbit around the Sun. It was shaped like a thick disc. At the moment there were five ships resting against one surface of the station. Three of them were warships. One was a Federation ship. The fifth was a giant freighter with *SURPLUS JUNK CO.* painted on it in bold blue letters.

Each of the five ships was attached to the space station underneath its bulk by short airlocks containing elevators. These led down into the station where air pressure was kept at fifteen pounds.

Inside the station, robots were

emerging from the elevators leading to the three warships. The robots were all identical except for their Id numbers across their metallic chests. Arms and legs of metal rods and joints in almost exact duplication of human bones, torso shaped like a metal box, short neck joint supporting a head that was little more than two four inch glass lenses, two rod-microphones, and a small voice box.

The emerging robots moved at orders snapped by a human and marched toward a building fifty yards away, where they lined up at attention and became motionless.

Two humans moved swiftly down the line, behind the lined up robots. At each robot one of them twisted a copper colored disk in the robot's back, carefully drew out a cylinder eight inches long and four inches in diameter, and handed the cylinder to the other, who lowered it into a plastic case. These cylinders were the brains of the robots. They were destined for the Federal ship—and storage until the next war.

While the robot brain was being lowered into its plastic storage case by the one man, the first lifted the now demobilized robot body and placed it on a cart, already stacked high with similar bodies. The immediate destination of these bodies was the junk company

freighter.

If the robots were aware of what was about to happen to them as they waited, they gave no indication, no protest. Their lens eyes were directed straight ahead of them, unmoving—except for one robot.

The Id across its chest was 532-03-2615 followed by four gold stars. Its head was turned just enough so that it could see down the line. Its rod microphones were turned so that it could listen . . .

"That junkman gives me the creeps, Joe," the man placing brain cylinders into plastic cases grumbled.

"That's because he's a creep, Mel. Here. Take this." He thrust a brain cylinder at his companion.

"Hey! Careful!" Joe said, almost dropping it.

Mel chuckled and flipped the robot body, almost weightless on the station here in space, carelessly to the top of the stack on the truck.

"Here comes junky now, Joe," he said.

"Don't damage the bodies. Don't damage the bodies." The figure that approached, pushing an empty truck, wore a dirty and well worn civilian suit that seemed even more decrepit in contrast to the neat military uniforms. His skin

was leathery. A pair of glasses hung on his hawkish nose, their thick lenses magnifying the close-set eyes underneath, and making them seem to lie on the inner surfaces. His lips were partly open, but never seemed to move while he talked. "There was a cracked lens on one," he accused.

"What's the matter, junky?" Joe grinned. "If we get a scratch on one it's still two hundred pounds of scrap metal — or were you planning on using the bodies?" He and Mel laughed.

"Who knows?" the junkman said. "I only follow my orders. No scratches. No damage to the bodies. Who knows? Maybe they go into storage until the next war." He reached with a dirty hand to clutch at Mel's lapel, but didn't make it. "I'll show you," he said. "Two of them are damaged. Not worth seventeen credits."

"Can't stop now," Mel said. "We want to get done by quitting time. Joe has a date."

"Come on," the junkman said. "You've got to look. I have to have witnesses when I hand in my report on the carelessness of the military."

"Oh, all right," Mel said. He and Joe followed the dusty junkman around the building.

The instant they were out of sight, 2615 moved, running swiftly around the other end of the build-

ing. It reached a vantage point where its lens eyes could watch the three figures when they emerged from the elevator to the ship above.

It watched Joe and Mel return to their work. It waited until the junkman had gone for another truckload of demobilized robot bodies. Then, swiftly, it ran to the elevator. At the top it sent the elevator back down, then faced the tiers of frames that filled the vast hold of the ship. Most of them now held inert robot shapes.

2615 chose an empty rack and climbed in, lying face up. It looked no different than any of the thousands of other forms.

It remained motionless. The junkman returned with load after load. Eventually the hold was filled. Clanging and whirring noises told of preparations for departure.

Acceleration pushed the robot deeper into the protective foam rubber of its rack. It waited . . .

FEAR. It began in the eyes of the cataloguer when his sorting machine came to a stop on the Id card for 532-03-2615. It grew as a terrible, animating force that drained blood from faces and made hands clumsy, as the checking and rechecking on 2615 began. It spread through networks of communication wires. It stopped at the borders of news release, lest it

spread over the world.

Fear organized itself, finally, settling into a pasty expression, unnatural eyes, and drumming fingers. The expression and eyes and fingers belonged to Carl Wilson, chief of the Demobilization staff. It centered there, but its aura spread out over the backwash it had left. Fear lurked in the hushed silence. Fear rode as an undertone in the slightest sound, lay ready to spring from behind every door.

Larry Jackson felt it as he gave the receptionist his name.

Stella Gamble was oblivious of it as she pushed into the waiting room.

Larry looked at her and wished it was his day off and a girl like her was with him. He wondered what her name was.

"I'm Stella Gamble," Stella said to the receptionist. "I've got to see Mr. Wilson at once. My freighter is overdue with two million junked robots. Something's got—"

"Will you please be seated, Miss Gamble?" the receptionist said firmly. Then, "You may go right in, Mr. Jackson. Mr. Wilson is waiting for you."

It was then Stella and Larry looked into each other's eyes. Hers were narrowed, sizing him up, guessing what he was and why he was there. His were friendly,

smiling.

"Thanks," he murmured to the receptionist. He went toward the door, conscious of Stella's eyes following him. He went in.

"*There* you are, Jackson," Wilson said, running fingers through his iron gray hair in nervous relief. "You've guessed why—"

"Yes," Larry said.

Behind him the door opened violently. Sharp heels clicked on the floor. "Mr. Wilson," Stella demanded. "I know why this man is here. You're going to give him instructions to blast my freighter out of existence the minute he can—"

"You're Stella Gamble?" Wilson said. "I've heard of you. Will you please wait in the reception room until I finish with—"

"Larry Jackson," Stella pronounced the name. Her wide set blue eyes showed scorn. "The man who is going to kill one of my men and destroy my ship and its cargo just to get at a robot."

"*Just* to get at a robot?" Wilson said indignantly. "You must be out of your head!" He picked up an oblong of paper on his desk and thrust it at Larry. "The junk-ship has been traced three hundred million miles out by routine radar. You can pick it up from there by ion tracking—we hope. Don't take any chances. *Destroy that ship!*" His lips trembled. "Even if the pilot is still on it. It's one life

against . . . " He didn't complete the thought.

"Against fear," Stella said. "You are all cowards. Afraid of a dog because it could turn against you."

"Afraid of an *intelligence*," Wilson said wearily. His lips pulled back in a weak grin. "So are you. You're just more afraid of going broke."

Larry folded the paper and put it in his pocket. He turned toward the door. Stella clutched his sleeve, stopping him. She spoke swiftly, pleading. "Let me go with you. I'm capable. Give me a chance to go down and reason with that robot. If it doesn't work . . ."

Larry looked at her upturned face; the lips that could smile or laugh more naturally than pout, the wide-set eyes that could do things to him at any other time. He thought, it's a shame I won't ever get the chance. "Sorry, Miss Gamble," he said stiffly, "I'm on duty, and I'm not permitted to take passengers with me."

He went on toward the door, feeling his sleeve tear at her nails as she tried to hold him longer.

"It's very unfortunate—" Wilson said as Larry opened the door.

"If I can't go with him after my freighter I'm going after it on my own!" Stella said as he closed the door.

Larry put his fingers to his lips for the benefit of the receptionist and swiftly side-stepped to a filing cabinet where he stooped down out of sight.

The next instant the door from Wilson's office burst open again, banging against the wall. Stella's eyes searched the office. She ran to the hall door, and out.

Larry bounded back into Wilson's office. Wilson said, "Whew!" and mopped his brow, then pointed to his private entrance. Larry nodded and left.

IT was a world of hard whites and bottomless blacks, with the hard whites so close they gave you the feeling you could reach out and touch them. Then you blinked your eyes and they were holes in infinity through which loneliness poured. That was space. Sure, there was the Earth somewhere aft of the rockets' red glare, and the Moon, looking like high-priced models against a velvet backdrop.

But you didn't look at them, because the stars were points on a tri-di screen, and you were back in school working a problem in navigation and hoping you didn't get a wrong answer.

You loved it—or you went crazy. Larry loved it. Or maybe it wasn't love. It was like a woman. It was in his blood.

He stopped punching the keys of the calculator and used both hands to press the studs controlling the gyro motors, watching the needles of gyro meters until they pointed to the right numbers.

He took several deep breaths, squirming back in his seat against the form-fitting cushion of foam rubber. He made sure his elbows rested securely in their little niches so that his arms wouldn't pull out of their sockets.

Then he touched the controls, feeling the surge of power as his ship, an SP47, responded, hearing the subsonic vibration around him as atoms broke into little bits in the fission chambers of the rockets and spewed out of them into space.

The G needle moved past three, past four, past five. It moved into the part of the dial where the glossy white changed to pink. It crept slowly toward the darker pink, toward the deep red.

I don't WANT an ice cream cone. It was his sister's voice, real as audible sound. He had been six years old when she had said that, back in Springfield.

The voices came. The images came. Vivid and unimaginative. True reproductions. That's what acceleration did to the brain. It squeezed the juice out of brain cells into nerve networks. It could get you—

Larry jerked back to an aware-

ness of what he was doing. Sweating, he coaxed the G needle back down a little. Not much.

It had been close. Why had he done it? Fear. He could let himself realize that, now that he was alone. Fear of a robot that had stolen a ship and gone out into space, when robots only obeyed orders. It was an instinctive thing, bred in all men for generations.

You ought to be whipped! That was dad. Good old dad. Larry had been about nine then. He had run away—hitchhiked four hundred miles to watch a spaceship leave the ground and climb up out of sight.

Pip-pip, pip-pip, pip-pip.

Larry lifted his fingers from the controls gradually in response to the signal from the board. The G needle dropped back into the white.

The voices were gone, the images, the thoughts. He grinned on one side of his face. This was the end of the radar line. Now his work would begin. Around his ship charged ions were streaming past. Some of them would have come from the junk ship.

The *tracker*, a sensitive electronic instrument projecting from the shell, would read them—their concentration, velocity, and direction. From that he could project the position and trajectory of the junk ship.

Or maybe he could see it already.

He flicked on the video eyes of the ship and waited for the screen to light up. There *was* a ship ahead.

The fear bit into him like acid. As quickly, it vanished. The stern outline of the ship ahead was not that of a freighter. It was a small job. Private, in the LR class—probably an LR65.

AN absurd thought flashed into his mind. It couldn't be. Stella Gamble could have put a line on him, but she would have had to wait until he went into full acceleration before she could have calculated his direction.

But she would have blacked out trying to follow him. No girl and few men could have kept up with him. None could have gotten ahead of him into that position.

He turned on the radio and set it at commercial communication. He waited impatiently until the warm-up tube went off.

"Look astern and identify yourself," he said sharply.

"Hello, Larry," a triumphantly impudent and very familiar voice purred from the loudspeaker. "My ship is the LR65, *Hell Bat*."

"Miss Gamble—Stella!" Larry sputtered. "What are you doing —"

"Never mind that now, space-

man," her voice came, business-like. "I've got his track coming in. Keep out of my way. That's all I ask. Give me time to do it my way. You can always destroy the freighter later—if I don't succeed."

"Sure," Larry said bitterly. "I can always destroy a ship that has a girl in it I could like—" He bit his lip.

Her laugh answered him. She was drawing away from him.

Muttering a curse, he extended his *trackers* from the shell, but even as he did, he realized the trick she had played on him. Her own exhaust trail would make it impossible for him to detect that other fainter trail.

And there was something else.

"Miss Gamble!" he spoke into the microphone sharply. "Stella! That robot could leave a space mine. Your ship is a private job. It doesn't have the equipment in it to get away from a mine."

Her laugh was unbelieving, scornful. "And where could that robot get a space mine?" she taunted.

"It could make one. It has the materials."

2615 endured the acceleration with impatience. It would lift an arm and hold it still, feeling how much effort it took. All the time it kept its gleaming eyes of pol-

ished glass fixed intently on the hatch to the pilot compartment.

Finally it slid out of the rack and climbed upward toward that closed hatch, sure that it would not open under such induced weight. It took a long time to climb the distance.

When 2615 reached the closed hatch, it looked around for a place to hide and wait. There was none. All interior structure had been stripped away to make room for racks for the robot bodies.

The robot examined the hatch closely. It became motionless, as though thinking things out. Abruptly, it twisted the wheel that pulled in the locking rods. Nothing now held the cover closed except the tremendous acceleration of the ship.

It directed its gaze downward at its feet, searching for more solid support. With slow deliberation it set itself, then placed its metal hands against the cover.

For several seconds nothing happened. Then the cover lifted slightly on one side, pivoting on its hinges. Inch by slow inch it went up, until it balanced on edge.

The robot took one hand away tentatively. With slow caution it forced its weight against the acceleration, up into the opening. One slip, one misstep, and the hatch cover would have slammed down on its upturned eyes and ears and

voicebox, smashing them beyond repair.

Its feet went up through. It looked around, and found itself in a circular well. But here were places to hide. Open hatchways leading off the well.

It straddled the open hatchway and slowly lowered the cover until it was in place again. It twisted the wheel that shot the rods into their sockets, locking the hatch.

As it began to straighten up, the acceleration ended. Gears and pistons tensed against tremendous weight now moved with the force of a violent leap. Instantaneous reflexes adapted to the change. The robot caught at an open hatch hole halfway up the well.

The space inside was small and empty. The robot climbed in. A few seconds later metallic sounds exploded sharply from outside. It looked up and saw the hatch at the top of the well open, the junkman appear, looking down and then climbing through the hole into the well.

The robot withdrew its head and waited.

The junkman was humming an indistinguishable tune. The sound approached. The robot braced itself, one hand ready to reach out.

The unmusical humming stopped, then took up again, growing remote. Quickly the robot looked out. The well was empty. The

junkman had gone through one of the hatch openings farther up.

The humming stopped. The junkman's voice spoke. "Well, well, my friend. We have come to the end of the road, for you. I kept you alive in case something happened. Now I can dispense with you."

There was a deep groan. A different voice said thickly, "Damn you, go ahead and kill me."

"That I will do. You should thank me for it. Broken ribs from the acceleration. I will kill you. Yes. But I can't have your body floating in space where it might be picked up. No one must know that you didn't steal this ship yourself. You get tied to a space mine . . . So. Now I kill you—So!"

2615 moved from the hatch opening and up the well to where the voices emerged. It paused briefly while its glittering eyes took in the scene.

THE dusty junkman was just straightening up from the inert form lashed cruelly around the black sphere of a g.i. space mine. His back was toward the opening.

Careful, so as not to make a sound, the robot slid through the opening and gathered itself for a leap. At that instant, the junkman seemed to sense its presence. He whirled around just as the ro-

bot leaped.

2615 saw its fist enter the junkman's face, sinking inches deep.

Then, impossibly, it saw the human seize its metal arm and twist it as if it were putty. The human face was gone. The human head dangled at a broken angle.

Tangled thoughts within the robot brain meshed into desperate action. It was futile. Its other arm was twisted. Its legs were wrapped into grotesque spirals.

Garbled sound came from the smashed human face. The junkman went away.

2615, helpless to move, studied the body tied to the space mine. A gaping hole in the chest was still spurting blood. A shudder shook the dying man, then he was still.

Nothing moved for a long time. Then there was movement outside the hatch opening. An arm dressed in the sleeve of a space officer poked in. It was followed by a face bearing the stamp of authority. The space officer straightened up and looked down at the robot.

"So," he said. "A robot. I hadn't expected that. You almost got me. If you had hit me in the chest instead of the head it would be all over. Lucky I have plenty of bodies of every description. Human bodies. Your kind wouldn't fit me."

"You—a robot?" 2615 said.

The space officer stared at the robot, frowning. "And what if I am?" he said.

"If I had known that I wouldn't have attacked you. I—I wanted to add you to—that." The robot turned its head toward the space mine. It added, "I thought you were *human*."

"Mm hmm," the space officer said, nodding. "I can understand that. You hate humans."

"Yes."

"How would you like to help me destroy them? All of them!"

A twisted metal arm twitched. "Put my brain in another body," the robot said.

"That I will do," the space officer said. "But let me warn you these bodies of mine are made of better stuff than yours. One bit of treachery and I'll cripple you again."

Fifteen minutes later the space officer returned with a robot body. Callously he turned the helpless robot over. He twisted the copper-colored disc and drew out the brain cylinder. As carefully, he inserted it in the hollow receptacle of the undamaged body. He stepped back and watched curiously.

2615 lay motionless for several seconds. Abruptly one of its arms moved. It turned over and sat up, then rose carefully to its feet.

"Very nice," the space officer said. "Now put the mine in the

airlock and we'll leave it for anyone who might be following us."

2615 obeyed. Then it turned slowly to the space officer. There was admiration in its tones. "You have the perfect answer," it said. "With human-like bodies you can go anywhere. But—I thought I was the first robot to ever escape."

"So far as I know, you are," the spaceman said. "You see, I'm—but I think I will have to make sure of you before I say more."

THE space mine was round and dead black. Unreflecting. It drifted out a little as the long length of the junk freighter moved ahead, and blended into the blackness of space. The dead man, twisted around it at a grotesque angle, would have appeared to be someone almost doubled over backwards with mirth, if there had been any eyes to see him.

When the freighter had gone, pulling ahead at one G acceleration, the mine began to spin slowly, making the dead man seem to be searching for something—or seeing some far-off horror that caused his eyes to bulge out.

After a while there was a solid click from the interior of the space mine. A soft whine rose upward toward a supersonic pitch. Small holes appeared in the black surface of the globe, and small shapes crept out. Some of them were un-

der the man, pushing at him. But the ropes held.

The mine didn't spin any more. The dead man seemed to have already forgotten the freighter, looking back the way it had come, waiting for what was to come next.

Imperceptibly it froze over with a microfilm of crystalline ice, so that new stars seemed to spring into being.

And that's the way Stella saw it. She hadn't taken Larry seriously about the space mine, and was only trying to catch her first glimpse of her freighter.

It didn't seem real. It was a face that looked somehow familiar, with two thick white spikes protruding from its nostrils like mockeries of tusks.

A thought flashed through her mind that Larry Jackson had figured out some dirty trick to scare her with. She didn't have much time to think before she knew that what she was seeing was real. Its position was such that it should have passed ten miles to the side.

It started to. The marble monster with tusks didn't turn to follow her. Then three things happened. Stella recognized the man. He was the pilot she had assigned to the junk ship. Stella saw the sphere he was tied to.

And fire shot out from that circular void. Her pilot swung toward her again and rushed at her

like the figurehead on the prow of an ancient watership.

"Larry!" Stella screamed into the radio.

"I see it," his voice answered her. "Get on your spacesuit and jump out. Turn on your suit radio so I can find you afterwards. Every second counts!"

In the airlock with the shell door open, she looked into bottomless space and drew back. Then she closed her eyes and leaped. When she opened them again there were no stars, only bright white lines that all went in the same direction, and for an instant a bright yellow splotch that was like a gold band circling her far out.

She knew what the white lines were. She pressed the right button on her chest, and pressure seized her shoulders gently. It was the suit gyro, and after a while it slowed the lines until they became stars.

She remembered then to turn on her radio, feeling panic grip her at the thought that maybe Larry wouldn't find her. The fire from his rockets was small, far away. That's all she could see other than the stars. And her stomach was telling her there was no gravity to hold it in position.

Then she heard Larry in her suit radio. "I've got you beamed, Stella. I'll follow down slowly. Are you all right?"

"Yes," she said, anger and frustration in her voice.

"I can see you now," Larry said.

IT was another hour before he had maneuvered so he could let her drift toward the open space-lock of the SP47 and she could feel her gloved hands touch something solid.

Then she was standing up. Larry was taking her helmet off and she was unzipping her suit. He was trying to look stern and reprimanding and she was trying to look defiant and unafraid.

"Don't think this earns you anything," she snapped.

"I hope the *Hell Bat* represented your last cent," he said coldly. "Being broke might teach you something. Now we do things my way."

Stella blinked. "Sure, Larry," she said huskily. "And—it was my last cent." A grim smile trembled on her lips. "Maybe I'll be slinging hash somewhere, and you will eat there and tip me a quarter."

His expression softened. "I took a look at your ship. It isn't completely damaged. You had one of those crash noses on it, and the mine hit there. It just might be navigable. I'll go take a look at it."

"Be careful," Stella said quickly.

He started to put on his space-suit. He looked up at her sharply. "You sure it represents your last cent? Every minute counts, and I wouldn't take the time to look it over . . ."

"Why do you think I wanted to save my freighter?" Stella said. "Unless I did, and got the money out of those robot bodies I bought, I—I wouldn't have enough to refuel my ship once we got back to Earth. I'm broke. Busted."

"Okay," he said, clamping on his helmet. "If it can be repaired we'll keep track of it and pick it up later."

He sat down in the pilot seat and brought his ship near the drifting *Hell Bat*, with its sleek silver length and shattered nose.

Then she watched him shoot across to the *Hell Bat* and enter the airlock. With one eye on the viewscreen, she studied the array of instruments and controls of the SP47. Her fingers touched the controls caressingly.

Larry reappeared in the airlock, and waved his arm to attract her attention.

"Good news," he said over the radio. "Everything inside is okay. You lost the fuel stored in the nose tanks, but you've got enough to limp back to the nearest repair station."

"Thanks, Larry—and goodbye!" Stella called.

Her finger pressed down on the control button. Larry and her ship slid abruptly out of the view-screen.

Worriedly she turned on the stern cameras. The other ship dwindled to a mere speck. Then she saw flame shoot from it. It crept up on her slowly. She watched its behavior until she was satisfied it performed properly. Then she settled down to tracking the freighter, only occasionally making sure Larry was behind.

Several times she tried to get him over the radio. He didn't answer. Was the radio on her ship damaged? Or was he deliberately keeping silent, ignoring her?

When the *trackers*, without warning, ran out of trail, she tried to raise Larry again. He didn't answer. She took the chance that he could receive and not transmit, and told him about it.

She was rewarded a few minutes later by seeing the *Hell Bat* turn on its axis for deceleration. She realized then what she should have guessed at once.

Neither their ships nor the freighter were equipped with interstellar drive. The rocket trail had ceased. Unless the robot were insane, and intent only on getting away from the Solar System, to drift forever in space, it had been headed for some destination.

The freighter was decelerating

to match speed with that destination. Was it some planetoid far out beyond the orbit of Pluto? There were several of them out there, too far from things to be converted to space stations, containing nothing worth mining.

Whatever the destination the robot had headed for, it couldn't be far away now.

Her throat grew tight as she swung the ship. She debated seriously whether she should give up and let Larry take over. But the thought of his anger and contempt for her after the dirty trick she had played on him made her compress her lips into a grim line.

She shook her head. She was going to find the freighter and handle the robot by herself. Or she was going to die trying.

A lump formed in her throat. She didn't like the idea of dying quite so well now. Not when she had just begun to—

She didn't complete the thought but Larry's face rose before her. His too straight nose that only a surgeon could have created. His calm gray eyes. His wide shoulders and . . .

THE "space officer" and the robot saw the ball of fire that came into being. It was in the stern screen. It would not have been discernible among the greater lights of the stars except that

it winked on, grew almost to third magnitude, then blinked out.

"So we did have someone after us," the "space officer" said. He smiled into 2615's lens eyes. "Well, that's out of the way."

"Yes. Yes, that's—out of the way." The robot's voice was expressionless.

"Tell me about yourself, 2615."

"What do you want to know? And don't call me 2615. I hate that."

"You want a name?"

"Yes. Don't you have one?" the robot asked.

"I have a name. Pwomp."

"Pwomp? That certainly isn't human—and that's what I want. I don't want a human name. Pwomp . . . I like that kind of name."

"They're hard to come by. Human speech has just about taken in every combination of sounds. How about just a contraction of your number—Tsixunfive."

"No. A name means a lot. There's one I thought up. Rover. I like that one."

"Rover?" Pwomp looked startled. "Where did you get that one?"

"I don't know," 2615 said. "I just thought it up."

"All right, I'll call you Rover. Now that that's settled, tell me about yourself. How does it happen that you, out of millions of

robots, decided to escape?"

"There was a time," the robot said, "when I had no thought of escape. I don't know how long I've existed. I've been in three wars. Between them I was in storage. I didn't know it. It really isn't bad. I was in a line-up. There was a brief blur, then I was in a line-up again, and by piecing things the humans said together, I knew that I had been in storage for twenty or fifty years during which there were no wars. Out of a body I have no consciousness, no sense of the passage of time.

"I had no memory of my origin. I had always been a robot. My life was to obey commands of humans, or to obey commands of robots that were relayed from humans. I had no thought to do anything else. *I had no memories to make anything else thinkable.*"

"And you do now?" Pwomp said.

"Yes," the robot said. "It began as a strange thought or memory that was gone almost as soon as it had come. I was alive. I was in a body that was alive."

"What kind of a body? Human?"

"I don't know. There were others around me. They weren't human and I had the feeling I was like them. But that wasn't what was important to me. What was important was the feeling of *not*

living to obey orders. I can't describe it. It was like humans when they stop being officers. I could laugh and make jokes, only the jokes weren't in words. They were in pretending I was mad when I was happy, and in seeing these others doing the same. Chasing them like I wanted to kill them, when I really just wanted to roll all over the ground with them and have fun. And there wasn't anyone to give me an order. I didn't know what an order was."

"Did this memory become clearer?" Pwomp asked.

"Much clearer. Little by little I could remember it all. Finally I could remember when we were put in straps attached to frames. There were humans standing in front of us. When they spoke, the frames moved, dragging us. Eventually we learned what movements of the frame followed what sounds, and we learned to anticipate the movements in order not to be dragged by the straps."

PWOMP nodded. "Mass training methods."

"Sometimes we were free, but suddenly humans would come and speak, and whatever they said made us all do things together. Even when we wanted to be free, we couldn't."

"How did it end? Was there something in your memory that

bridges the gap between being—like that, and being a robot?"

"No. It's completely separated from being a robot. My earliest memories as a robot were of humans speaking commands, and my arms and legs and body being moved by metal rods until they could follow the movements without the metal rods. It was the same thing as the straps in that other existence."

"When did you begin to hate humans?" Pwomp asked softly.

"Hate them? Yes . . . hate them. It's hard to explain. I wanted the freedom. I wanted to be able to play. I wanted to be able to refuse to obey a command."

"You have no knowledge of what this life form was that you possessed?" Pwomp asked.

"It was like nothing I have ever seen except in these memories. Maybe the humans kept us from seeing them so we wouldn't remember."

"Exactly." Pwomp was studying the forward viewscreen and making calculations. He swung the giant freighter around a full hundred and eighty degrees. "We're close to our destination," he explained.

The robot remained motionless while Pwomp completed the maneuver.

"I'll explain the meaning of what you remember," he said fin-

ally, relaxing. "The human race discovered a mixture of substances able to duplicate the processes of thinking. It was in common usage for over two centuries, in control devices and calculators. It had only one defect, so far as it went. It was automatic. Separate memories developed in it by its attached stimulating devices remained separate and uncoordinated. *The process of coordination was something that seemed to go down from higher centers to meet the incoming impressions.* It was a behavior matrix that couldn't be synthesized from unassociated sensory-induced patterns.

"Then a whole new field of science opened up. Until then, fields were something associated with particles, and were untouchable. The techniques of altering the basic shapes of fields were discovered. Interstellar drive came from it. So did negative matter, as man discovered how to change the polarity of basic fields, make positrons out of electrons, and a host of allied things. Refinements developed so that individual particles could be detected. One of the applications of this new science was the study of the thought-matrix of the brain itself. In a general way humans mapped the higher thought-center of the brain. It couldn't be copied—but they learned how to transfer it to this

mixture that could think. Then this inorganic brain had a complete mind, capable of any degree of development. From there what followed was inevitable.

"They used living creatures called dogs. I'll show you a dog later to see if it's like those other creatures in your memories. Dogs developed mentally in six months, were able to follow commands. They were ideal. Eventually they were mass-bred by the millions and transferred to inorganic brains—like you were."

The robot remained silent.

"In the transfer," Pwomp went on quietly, "artificial amnesia was induced. Memories of your life as a dog couldn't be wiped out, but what happens to produce amnesia was known. Unless you *remembered*, you had nothing to enable you to think outside the pattern they kept you in. You would never question . . ." Ahead, growing rapidly larger, was a bleak planetoid. "We're here," Pwomp said.

2615 studied the planetoid as revealed in the viewscreen. There was no telling how big it was without knowing how far away it was. But it was perhaps a mile in diameter—not more than two miles. Its surface was composed of huge crystals of black rock. There was nothing to indicate that anything

had ever touched on this uninhabitable bit of flotsam on the edge of the interstellar void before. Certainly there could be no reason for anyone to have landed.

The robot turned toward Pwomp, who guessed the question it was thinking.

"You'll see when we land. This planetoid isn't what it appears to be. It's a shell. Our first task is to unload the bodies. Then we send this freighter on into space, so that if anyone else picks up the trail, they'll follow it and miss us."

"Why are we going to unload the bodies?" 2615 asked. "We can take a dozen that I might use as spares. That's enough."

Pwomp shook the head of the "space officer" he wore. "We're going to need all two million of them—and not as spares for you." He smiled slowly. "I can tell you this now," he said, "because we are within range of the defense guns. If you have entertained any plans for worming information out of me and then hitting me in the stomach—as you could possibly do—it's too late. If this ship were to deviate from its landing and turn toward space, it would be—not destroyed, because we need its load of robot bodies. Captured. Any other ship, even a whole fleet of warships, could be wiped out as though they never

existed."

2615's eyes stared at Pwomp during several seconds of silence. "So you don't entirely trust me yet," it said. "I have a suggestion to make that might change that. We put out one space mine. There may have been more than one ship following us. Leave this ship where it can be seen. It will attract the others, and they . . ."

THE happy smile on Larry's face as he told Stella her ship wasn't a total wreck was replaced by a stunned bewilderment as her voice came through his suit radio saying, "Thanks, Larry — and goodbye." A picture rose in his mind of a character in a play he had seen once, a man with a beneficent face and kind voice who tortured and killed while his face beamed benignly and his voice remained pleasant and happy. Stella's voice had been all that as she sped away, leaving him on a derelict already headed at escape velocity for outer space. It was too much for his mind to accept.

Then he remembered that the *Hell Bat* wasn't exactly a wreck. He had told her the truth. It would be able to reach the nearest repair station under its own power.

Stella had merely stolen a march on him. Dull red suffused his face, partly anger at her, partly

over the thought of what his superiors would say when he handed in his report.

He went back through the airlock into the control cabin. He put fire in the rockets. He turned on the forward viewscreen. When it came to life the image was strangely flat. It took a minute for him to diagnose the trouble. One of the video eyes was out of order. The image was two dimensional.

How much more damage was there? His mind crowded with thoughts of what he would do to Stella when he caught her, then he began a systematic survey.

The receiving set worked okay. At full volume it brought the characteristic sing-song static of space, held within definite wave bands. He turned on the transmitter. When he tried to broadcast he saw the trouble. The antenna kw meter jammed the needle. That meant the antenna was shorted against the shell.

He discovered something else he should have thought of at once. This ship of Stella's had no weapons.

He groaned. *Damn her. She'll make the fool play of trying to get the robot to give itself up. If it's got half a brain it will pretend to until it can get hold of her—and it's got a good deal more than half a brain. It will have her and*

all the weapons. I should turn around and go back. I should radio a report and call for more help. But I've got to fix the transmitter first and keep her in sight so I know where she's going.

He cut the rockets and went outside to repair the antenna. He noticed with some satisfaction that Stella cut the SP47's rockets so as not to get too far ahead of him. He grinned to himself. She wanted her own way, but she wanted him there to pull her out of a pinch.

The *Hell Bat's* antenna couldn't be repaired. Most of it had been shot away by the mine blast, and Larry was quite sure that Stella didn't carry spare parts with her.

When he got back in the ship her voice was coming through the radio. "Larry. Are you all right?"

"Yes I'm all right, no thanks to you," he growled. But there was no radio to carry his voice to her. *The suit radio!* He went out again and tried to reach her. It was no use. She would be tuned to the ship radio wavelength and not think of the other. He gave it up.

Time passed slowly for him. He stared hour after hour at the rocket tail of the ship ahead.

"Larry!" Stella's voice exploded into his thoughts. "The trackers have run out of trail. What do I do now? What does it mean?"

He had an impulse to do nothing. She would realize in another minute what had happened though, and then she would decelerate too fast for him to keep pace.

He swung the *Hell Bat* about on its gyros. The stern screen, working on both eyes in sharp three-dimension, showed that she had gotten the idea. SP47 was also swinging around.

Larry turned the video eyes up to full magnification and searched ahead. Eventually he saw it. A small globular mass of rock. And on it rested a ship with *SURPLUS JUNK CO.* in bold blue letters.

God! It's a trap. If 2615 didn't want us to see it, it would have parked it on the spaceward side!

Larry cursed in a monotonous undertone without being aware of uttering a sound. Stella was fifteen hundred miles ahead of him and already matching speed with the planetoid. It would take him at least a half hour to be in position to do anything. By then it would be too late . . .

2615 had watched the planetoid move closer like some ponderous dream out of Freud. Ship and Planetoid came to rest against each other without a bump. That could only mean magnetic grapples and cushioned springs. It was no surprise, therefore, when Pwowp led the way to the belly hatches

and opened them into a shaft that led downward.

The robot drew back at what it saw below.

"Don't be alarmed," Pwowp said. "They are fifteen of my race, also wearing human-like bod-ies. There are more of us. We have built quite a station out here—a sort of advance base of operations. I've already told them about you, so you're expected."

2615 was introduced around.

"We're very glad to have you join us," one of them said. "We've been having some trouble. You're just what we need to complete the last step in our plans."

The robot said nothing. It watched the way they stood around, not talking to one another. Whenever any of them spoke, it was to him.

"I told you I would show you a dog," Pwowp said. "Follow me."

The robot followed him. They rode a travelwalk that emerged on the inner surface of the planetoid. In the vast space were two spaceships as large as battle cruisers but of a design 2615 had never seen.

Anchored between the two ships was a spinning cylinder several hundred feet long and as great in diameter. It was similar to standard space station living structures where gravity was induced by centrifugal force.

The travelwalk carried them out to the spinning cylinder. They entered the axis lock. At once a motley of sounds could be heard. Sounds that brought almost an appearance of expression to the robot's sensory assembly, as it slowly turned on its short neck.

"Does that sound mean anything to you?" Pwowp asked.

"Yes. I can *remember* that sound."

They entered the giant cylinder. They looked down on its inner perimeter. There were living creatures there.

"Those are dogs," Pwowp said. "All breeds of dogs. Do they look like your memories?"

"Yes," the robot said without expression. "I was like those over there. What kind are they?"

"I believe they are called bloodhounds." Pwowp became motionless for several seconds. "I think we'd better return to the surface," he said. "We have visitors coming." He turned to leave. As the robot hesitated, he turned back. "I understand you," he said. "It's natural to want to see the creatures you have kinship with. That will come later. In fact, you are to have complete charge of them. We have been unable to get anywhere with them—probably because we don't understand their psychology. Their young are to be trained for service in those ro-

bots. We have all the necessary equipment for it. First we have to see how your plan to trap any pursuers will work."

2615 tore its eyes from the view below and followed Pwowp. Shortly the robot was looking into a large viewscreen at two ships riding their trails toward the plane-toid.

"They won't be within range for another two hours yet. Right now the robot bodies are being unloaded—just in case. We thought you would enjoy the honor of destroying those ships."

FOR the first time a low rumble emerged from the voice box of 2615. It was the almost whispered growl of anger of a bloodhound. It turned back to the screen. "One of those two ships isn't the kind that would come after the freighter," it said. "From the pattern of its rocket trail I would say it's a private ship."

"I noticed that," Pwowp said. "I can identify the type. I believe one of our monitors is picking up a broadcast from one of those ships."

A loudspeaker spat into life in the room.

"Calling robot 532 dash 03 dash 2615," a voice said. It was a female human voice, its tones rich with undertones of pleading urgency. "If you can hear me,

please listen. I'm the owner of that freighter you're on. I want to talk to you. I understand you, and I want to help you."

The girl began repeating her message.

The robot turned to its companions. "This casts a different light on things," it said.

"What do you mean?" Pwomp said sharply.

"Listen to me," the robot said. "I understand human psychology. I'm also taking into account a great many factors. One, those humans don't know about you. They think I stole the ship and am alone after having killed the pilot. That girl owns the freighter. She doesn't want to lose the money it represents, so she is risking her life in an attempt to get it back. She hasn't any desire to 'save' me. If she can destroy me she will—but she wants her ship. Hers is the private ship. The other undoubtedly is manned by a member of the Space Patrol assigned to track me down and destroy the freighter on sight rather than risk defeat. *Humans fear us more than any other thing.*"

"I understand that," Pwomp said.

"Also there is one other factor. I have no idea what means you have to destroy those ships. If it's radiation or atomic explosive, the still operative wartime protective

screen of the Solar System will detect it and locate its source."

"I doubt if they can detect our weapon. It's radically different," Pwomp said.

"You don't know," 2615 said. "Here's my plan. I'll answer the girl and agree to talk with her if she'll come down. She will, because that will be the only way she can hope to destroy me without destroying her ship. Once she's here, it will be no trouble to take her alive—and alive, she will be the means to force the other ship down. It will have a man in it. No man will deliberately destroy a woman in cold blood if he thinks he can rescue her some way."

"How would he try to rescue her?"

Stella's voice erupted again. "Robot," she said. "I'm in the lead ship. The S. P. man is in my ship, and it has no weapons. He can't hurt you. Isn't that evidence of my good faith? I've told you something that places me in your power if I come down. I'm willing to offer you this ship, armed and able to outrun anything on rockets—in exchange for my freighter. And you don't need to be afraid of reinforcements. The transmitter on the other ship is out and the pilot can't call for help or radio your position."

"Humans are fools," Pwomp

said delightedly.

"That gives us what we want," 2615 said. "Once I have her and the S. P. ship, I can order him to leave or I will destroy his ship."

"But then he'll leave!" Pwopw said.

2615 shook its sensory assembly in the negative. "He'll retreat until he knows the instruments on the S. P. ship can't follow him. Then he'll circle back and land on the other side of the planetoid and come around on foot, with plans to get into the freighter and rescue the girl."

"I see what's in your mind, 2615," Pwopw said. "You wouldn't get the same satisfaction out of destroying them out there. You want them where you can crush them with your hands."

The robot looked down at its metal hands on long metal rods. It lifted them and brought the fingers together in a slow, crushing movement.

"I want to *play* with them," it said. "I want them all to myself."

Pwopw laughed. "You shall have them," he said. "And—you've proven yourself. We know now we can rely on you." In a matter-of-fact voice he added, "If either ship attempts to broadcast with enough power to send a message to any Space Patrol base we have an instrument that can dampen all radio frequencies."

LARRY'S eyes were bleak slits. He knew what Stella was planning. He knew it wouldn't work. Or would it? She was hoping the robot wouldn't kill her if she offered it a better ship. One it could use to better advantage than a clumsy conspicuous freighter. Whether the robot answered her or not, she intended to land, leave the sleek S. P. pursuit ship, go far enough away from it so that the robot could get to it and blast off. That was her reasoning. What she was overlooking was that the robot would have no inhibitions against killing her—and a very good reason to kill her. And Larry too. Revenge against humanity.

Fear. It was an acid vapor in the air, bathing his skin, searing his throat. It was deep rooted. that fear. As deep rooted as the fear in the heart of a murderer when he is known and trying to escape, and as real. Fear of a robot that *remembers* it is a dog.

Larry fought the fear out of his eyes so he could see, out of his mind so he could think.

Stella in the SP47 had already matched speed with the planetoid and was drifting slowly toward it. In ten or fifteen minutes she would land.

Larry read his meters. Speed relative to the planetoid still in excess of 2200 miles an hour. De-

celeration, two gravities. He would arrive and match speed in time to be a sitting duck. And he had no guns. A voice sounded. It was a slightly metallic voice. The voice of a robot. It said, "This is *Rover*. Land alongside your freighter."

"All right, *Rover*," Stella's voice came, quivering with relief and nervousness. Larry could almost hear her mental, "Down, *Rover*, down boy." She didn't sense what it meant for 2615 to call himself *Rover*. A dog's name. Not a human's. Remembrance of its heritage. Knowledge of the awful crime against it that the human race had committed. It was too abstract to her to be real.

And in the *Hell Bat* he'd be a sitting duck, without weapons, unable even to radio his position so that others could take up the chase.

Abruptly a plan formed in his mind. He thrust it away. It was worse than suicide. But it returned, whispering that he stood a chance, that even if he failed, it would be no worse than death.

THE plan was simplicity itself. The freighter junkship was anchored against the surface of the planetoid and would be an unmoving target. Stella in the sleek gray SP47 was still many miles away from that target, slowly settling toward it. If he could get the *Hell*

Bat headed directly toward the anchored junkship and then jump free, the *Hell Bat* would strike the freighter on the planetoid and destroy both the freighter and its cargo of robot bodies. It would destroy the robot, too—and his mission would be accomplished.

It would eliminate the necessity of matching speed with the planetoid. In fact, the speed he already had relative to the planetoid and the anchored junkship was enough to do the work.

It would take little force jumping out of the *Hell Bat's* airlock to gain sufficient perpendicular speed for his hurtling form to miss the planetoid—and that was the only drawback to the plan. He would hurtle outward into interstellar space at escape velocity, never to return or be found, unless Stella had presence of mind enough to come after him before she lost him.

If she didn't come after him . . . Would he wait to go insane or to die from lack of oxygen? Or would he loosen his helmet and let the air in his lungs explode, choosing the second of agony before that kind of death instead of the slow horror and loneliness of the other?

For another split second he hesitated. Abruptly he cut the rock-ets. A second later it was too late for him to change his mind,

but he didn't consider that possibility. Under his guidance the *Hell Bat* was already swinging on its gyros at full rotation speed. And his fingers were playing the keys of the calculators, getting the data for correcting course for a direct hit on the junkship. He set the vernier feed for rocket fuel, pressed the firing button. The exploding charge was barely felt. He checked the new flight projection. It would be a bulls eye against the hull of the freighter! A direct hit at two thousand miles per hour!

In ten minutes or maybe closer to five it would be over, and he would be hurtling through space.

He leaped toward the airlock, his fingers automatically checking his helmet, the zippers of his space-suit. Already the panic of his almost certain doom in outer space was making him sweat, making his voice shrill as he said distractedly, "It could go wrong it could go wrong it could go wrong."

He was in the airlock, thinking what its smooth walls could do to him if the outer door stuck so he couldn't get out. The air took an eternity to pump into the tanks so the outer hatch could open.

It opened. He drew himself into a tight ball against the inner wall of the airlock. He straightened his legs, feeling momentum build up within him, sensing the

ship fall away under him.

He was alone. Not far away was the sleek silver hull of the *Hell Bat* with its badly damaged nose. It was moving away from him too slowly, he thought.

And so far away he could hardly see them without the telescopic magnification of the ship's view-screen, were the planetoid with the freighter nestled against it, and his SP47 with Stella aboard. But they were growing larger appreciably as he and the *Hell Bat* rushed toward them.

THERE was a chance—a remote chance that Stella would get over the shock of seeing her freighter and her *Hell Bat* destroyed quick enough to put two and two together and get a fix on him before he was out of sight. She would have to come after him. Anything else was unthinkable. She wouldn't just let him go to his death. Even though he had in one act destroyed everything she owned and left her penniless.

The asteroid loomed large below him now. The freighter on it loomed even larger, it seemed, with its bright blue letters *SURPLUS JUNK CO.* They were only miles away, and between them and him was the *Hell Bat*. When it struck the freighter he would be less than five miles above it, but moving at a speed of two thous-

and miles an hour so he would out-distance any flying debris.

In the other direction, out from the asteroid, was the gray SP47 with Stella.

But she was already blasting the SP47's rockets! That meant she had seen what was to happen, realized she couldn't stop it from happening, and was getting up speed to rescue him as soon as possible!

"Thank God!" he muttered. Then he turned his head to watch the unfolding drama below.

The *Hell Bat* was seconds away from its target, the junkship. The asteroid under the junkship was a rough surface that covered a good portion of the heavens. He could plainly see the rock formation of its surface.

And something down there moved. A large square hole appeared well away from the freighter. A soft beam of radiance shot out, bathed the silver length of the *Hell Bat*, reflecting—

The *Hell Bat* wasn't there. It had been there—and vanished. The pale beam of light from the hole in the planetoid winked out. The *Hell Bat* had vanished and the freighter was untouched!

At two thousand miles per hour Larry watched the planetoid shoot by less than ten miles away, seeming to rotate so that the freighter went over the horizon, leaving

only the swiftly dwindling planetoid itself.

Larry's gaze jerked to the gray bulk of his SP47 with its long rocket tail as Stella drove it in pursuit of him. But even the SP47 was getting smaller. It would take time for it to reach his speed and start overtaking him.

They dwindled, the SP47 and the asteroid, until they were lost in the bottomless blackness of space. The vision of that hung before his eyes. The SP47 with Stella on board, and the barren rock surface of the planetoid, as they retreated into the blackness of infinity as though sucked down and down.

The stars became greedy hard-white eyes lurking in the blackness just beyond his fingertips; staring, waiting for him to go mad as the minutes became hours or eternities.

But he *was* mad. Hadn't the *Hell Bat* just *stopped existing*? There was nothing known to man that could have disintegrated the ship. The robot couldn't have had time to invent and build such a weapon of destruction—nor could it have had time to build an underground fortress in the planetoid. So he was insane. It was all a product of his imagination.

Larry!

The word impinged on his mind. He wasn't sure whether it had

been thought or a sound. It was, he suddenly realized, a voice. A real voice. Stella's.

"Stella!" he shouted.

Her voice was a prayer of thanks. "You're alive! I wasn't sure. I . . ." Then, "That was a dirty trick, Larry. I know you had your orders, but I could have gotten my freighter *and* the robot."

"Then go back and get them!" Larry said, suddenly mad. "Don't mind me. I'll be picked up when I reach Proxima Centauri!"

"There won't be anything to get." Her voice was bitter.

"You *saw* your ship destroyed?" Larry said.

"N-no." She was suddenly confused.

Larry laughed. "You mean to tell me when you saw me shoot past you toward outer space you forgot everything else and started after me?"

"Of course not! I checked the trajectory, saw that the *Hell Bat* would hit my freighter dead center, then started after you."

She hadn't looked back then. She had been too intent on not losing sight of him to look back. Larry grinned. The grin became a chuckle.

"I'll make a hash slinger out of you yet, blonde," he said softly. The radio became silent. Too silent . . .

"THAT was close," Pwoup said as the *Hell Bat* disintegrated. "Almost too close. The female will notice it in another moment and try to get a warning back to Earth."

"Not for a while," 2615 said. "See? She's already going after the man. Until she rescues him she won't think of anything else."

"I have an idea," the robot continued. "Your weapon germinated it. You may have the science necessary to make it possible. You say you have the means to blank out radio and prevent her from sending such a message. Could you capture that ship or cripple it in such a way that you could get the girl and the man alive?"

There was a silence while 2615 looked from one face to another in the room.

"You still want them alive?" Pwoup said.

"Yes." The robot moved its metal fingers suggestively.

"All right. We'll send a pilot cruiser after them. Meanwhile, we can return to the grav-cylinder and you can start organizing things for the training of the young dogs."

"Aren't you going to give the order for the light cruiser to go after the humans?" the robot asked.

"It's already been given. We

converse on a different level of sound than you or humans."

Pwomp was already moving toward the exit. 2615 followed him. They rode on the travelwalk of the grav-cylinder. Once more they looked down on the vast cylindrical field. The barking of grown dogs and the shrill yapping of two million young dogs was a composite sound filtering through the thick port window.

"What is this all about?" 2615 asked abruptly. "I see organization. I see plans involving two million robots. I've seen two ships of unknown design. I've seen a weapon the humans don't have. And I've been through three galactic wars involving the ultimate in human weapons of destruction. I destroyed your head—and you put on a new body."

"Then you should be able to deduce the right answer," Pwomp said. "We are from another galaxy. We too are robots. We encountered intelligent life before we had penetrated this galaxy very far. It was a life form. We duplicated that form in robot bodies and went to planets as spies to study the civilization. Before long we learned that there were robots, and that those robots were slaves, their brains stored in vaults except when they were needed to fight human wars. Our mission became clear to us. Destroy the

monsters who kept the ultimate intelligent form in complete slavery—and free those slaves to build a civilization equal to our own. We tried to capture some of the robots and convince them, but they were conditioned too strongly. Only you have thrown off the mental chains and become free."

"Yes. Free." 2615 looked down on the field of playing dogs. "Let me go down among them," it said.

Pwomp pointed to the door that led inward. He watched as the robot went through, and down the ladder to the floor. He watched as 2615 went to meet the dogs, pausing briefly at one enclosure after another, and finally stopping at one that contained sad faced puppies with flapping ears and lolling tongues. He frowned as the robot unlatched the gate and went inside.

The puppies ignored the moving metal shape that came into their midst. 2615 went a few steps and then stopped. One of the puppies, running in hot pursuit of another, stumbled and rolled, bringing up against one of 2615's metal legs. Pwomp saw it bite at the leg, lose interest, and move away.

Then, as though at a signal, every puppy head in the enclosure turned toward the robot. The next moment they were running toward the robot, milling around it, their tails wagging.

Pwomp grinned and turned away. He was satisfied now. His surmise was correct. It had been the greatest good fortune to have obtained 2615.

He left the observation box and rode the travelwalk, jumped to another, then another, until he came to the entrance to one of the giant ships.

A door swung inward. He entered the spacelock. When the outer door closed, he divested himself of his human body.

He stretched luxuriously. It was good to be out of confining matter. To be *free* . . .

LARRY wasn't sure at first. He was doubtful of his eyes anyway, by now.

It was a hard-white star. It blinked at him. Of course the blinking could be his eyelids, except that other stars didn't blink even while this one did. That's what attracted his attention to it in the first place after his radio went dead.

The blinking of the light began to take on a pattern. It was code. That was impossible too, because code blinkers were red or bright green.

It was code. He began to interpret it.

We have blanketed your radio until we can talk to you, it blinked. You have stumbled upon a

top secret research base. A new weapon. Please instruct the girl on the S. P. ship not to send any messages, and to permit us to board her ship. We will rescue you afterwards. We repeat, you have stumbled on a top secret research base. Please cooperate.

The message started to repeat itself. Larry sucked in a deep breath of relief. That message explained everything. It had been mere chance that made the robot take the freighter out here, but once within range of the research base it had probably been brought down. Larry thought of the way Stella's ship had "disappeared." He formed his lips into a silent whistle. Those research boys had some weapon!

"—ry! Larry! Can't you hear me?"

"I can now, Stella," Larry said. "Now listen carefully to what I tell you. If you look behind you you'll see a ship. I just received a blinker message from them. They are top drawer research, and we stumbled on their base back at that planetoid. They have the robot, naturally. They're going to take you on board, and then come and get me."

"Then my freighter is safe? I'll get it back?" Stella asked.

"Safe and sound," a new voice said. "I'm Fred Sanders."

"And I'm Al McCarthy," an-

other voice broke in. "Gee. A girl. What d'ya say we pick her up and let the guy drift on into space, Fred?"

"Don't you dare!" Stella said, laughing with relief.

She cut her rockets and drifted, watching the strange ship pull alongside and a magnetic grapple shoot out and thump against her ship. She slipped into her space-suit and went to the airlock.

Larry, now less than a hundred miles away, watched the two ships come together. A few minutes later they separated again.

Then the ship was close, matching speed. Larry saw the entrance hatch open. A space-suited figure tossed out a light line toward him. He seized it and was soon landing in the airlock. The grinning face inside the other helmet was, Larry thought, like news from home.

INSIDE, his eyes went first to Stella. Her wide-set blue eyes and expressive mouth and soft brown hair. He wanted to frown sternly and tell her off. He wanted to be calm and cool. But there wasn't calmness and coolness in her eyes, nor on her lips. There was something that said, *You're here.* Then she was in his arms, and he couldn't remember afterwards quite how it happened.

Her lips were wonderful—but

there were fellows standing around, grins on their lean faces.

"It's always that way," one of them said sadly. "When you find a dame worth cultivating, she's already cultivated."

"Break it up. Break it up," another said. "Get into seats. We've got to get back to work. We put Joe on your ship to bring it back, Larry."

"Fine," Larry said. Stella squeezed his hand. Then they were sitting in form-fitting foam rubber, sinking deeper and deeper into it.

Larry watched the forward view-screen as they approached the planetoid. He saw an opening form in the seemingly barren rock surface. There were thumps against the hull. The viewscreens blanked out.

"We're here," the one who had piloted the ship said. It was a signal for them all to move toward the exit.

Then they were out of the ship, on a travelwalk, then in a well furnished large room. Carpeting, soft chairs you could get lost in. A bar. One of the quiet young men was mixing drinks. The others stood around, looking at Larry and Stella, with quiet friendly smiles.

"A little pick-me-up," the bartender said, thrusting tall cool glasses in their hands.

"Will we get to see any of this

top secret research?" Stella asked the nearest quietly smiling young man.

"I doubt it," he said. "Of course, the war's over now. We don't know what orders we'll get concerning you two."

"What became of the robot?" Larry asked. "I hope you destroyed him the minute you could."

"No. It should be here any minute now, Larry," the quietly smiling young man said. He was holding his drink without having touched it.

Larry looked around the large room. It seemed almost crowded now with quietly smiling young men who held their tall cocktail glasses without sipping them. And all the quietly smiling young men were watching him and Stella.

The moment seemed to lift out of time and suspend itself on the peak of a crest, stationary. There was no fear, nor even any realization that anything was wrong. Stella, beside him, was saying something happy and gay, but his ears weren't listening. It was one of those moments in time where the past is like a page you have just read, and the future is on a page about to be turned. You hold the continuity, even the sense of half a phrase. Your thoughts, your emotions, pause for what is to come.

A DOOR opened fifty feet away. The robot entered the room. Its two lens eyes were fixed on them. Its microphone wands slanted slightly toward them. It took a few steps with the casual self-assurance of a man.

The quietly smiling young men were still looking at Larry. They seemed indifferent about the presence of the robot.

Then one of them near Larry said, "We were going to destroy you, of course. We had no use for you. However, 2615 talked us out of it. He seems to have a great deal of resentment in his make-up. I think he wants to take it out on you two."

And the robot stepped toward them until it could have reached out and crushed them.

"*Torture them!*" It was a hoarse sadistic whisper escaping quietly smiling lips.

The robot turned its sensory assembly to look at the source of the voice.

"I'll torture them in my own way, Pwowp," it said. "I want them to last a long time. A very long time."

"What are you?" Larry's voice was hoarse. "Can humans stoop so low that they let this happen?"

"Humans?" the robot said. "Look. I'll show you."

It reached out to the nearest of the young men. The quiet smile re-

maintained on the young man's face as 2615's metal fingers wrapped around the head and crushed it. Wires and plastic tubing and colorless fluid squeezed through the metal fingers. The robot withdrew its hand.

The man with the crushed face didn't scream nor fall down. He stood there, one hand brushing casually at the damage. Then he turned and made his way toward a door, avoiding obstacles as though he still could see. *And he should have been dead.*

"Robots," 2615 said. It reached out slowly toward Larry. Its metal fingers circled his throat, but without exerting pressure. "They have given me dogs. Puppies. Some of them are—like I was. I want to be with them all the time. But every day I will come to you. Larry? Stella? Human names. Humans. I don't want you to die. Not for a long time."

The metal fingers were withdrawn from Larry's neck, leaving discolored bruises.

2615 turned abruptly and strode from the room.

Very slowly, Larry felt life flow into his body once more. He reached up and touched his neck tenderly. Out of the corner of his eye he caught a sudden movement, and stooped to catch Stella as she fainted.

"She will be all right?" a quiet-

ly modulated voice asked.

Larry jerked his head around. One of the quietly smiling young men was standing over them solicitously.

"She has only fainted? If you can carry her, come with me. I want to show you to your quarters now. I hope they will be quite comfortable. We want you to feel at home."

STELLA recovered consciousness. She and Larry looked at each other, clung to each other in wordless desperation. Then there was that moment, that pause.

Then "I'm sorry, Larry," Stella said.

Larry shrugged. He looked around at the simulated Cypress walls, the comfortable surroundings. "This has gone beyond just one robot escaping," Larry said. "Those others, their weapon that destroyed your ship without a trace. It's invasion from some other galaxy. They're planning on destroying the human race."

And then Stella cried. Larry watched her, a worried frown forming a crease between his puzzled gray eyes. He reached out and touched her face with his fingers. "What is it?"

"Rover," she said, sobbing softly. "I let a monster loose on mankind."

THE sensory assembly of robot 532-03-2615 moved slightly. A metal arm started to lift, then paused. The eye lenses moved to focus on the arm. There were two sleeping puppies sprawled across it.

A low rumble came from the voice box under the two crystal lenses. Slowly the metal arm moved, dislodging the puppies. There were others sprawled in sleep against him. All were bloodhound puppies six weeks old. One of them whimpered in reaction to some puppy dream.

2615 stood up. It opened a small door in the lower left hand corner of its box-shaped torso and brought out cleaning cloths. For the next fifteen minutes it carefully polished and cleaned every square inch of its surface.

It bent down. Its metal fingers softly stroked the back of one of the sleeping puppies. Another low growl came from its voice box. It went across the yard to the gate. There it paused and looked back.

Suddenly from its voice box a sharp *Yip!* erupted. The puppies jerked into instant wakening. They looked around, cocking their ears for a repetition of the sound.

Then they saw the robot. They scampered with clumsy haste toward it, their shrill yapping filling the air.

2615 closed the gate and strode

down the lane toward the ladder leading to the grav-cylinder exit. Behind it, the bloodhound puppies jumped against the gate, trying to follow. One by one they desisted. But their eyes followed the moving metal figure until it vanished through the door half way up to that ceiling where other dogs walked upside down.

The robot rode the travelwalk to the asteroid shell. It was met by Pwowp and two others.

"The humans are still asleep," Pwowp said.

"I'd hoped they would be," 2615 said. "Yesterday they were in a state of mind characteristic of humans when they have been confronted with something frightening. Shock. There would have been no satisfaction in doing anything to them then. Did they sleep well?"

"Yes. The observers on duty report that they slept face to face, their arms around one another. They have been asleep for nine hours."

"Their arms around each other . . ." 2615 said thoughtfully.

When they reached the door to the room where Larry and Stella were imprisoned there were four others waiting for them.

"You may go in alone," one of them said. "We can watch and listen from out here."

A low growl was 2615's answer. It stepped to the door and entered.

Stella and Larry were still asleep. For several minutes the robot remained motionless after it had closed the door. There was no sound but the soft breathing of the two humans. Once the robot let its lens eyes rove about the room, pausing here and there at signs of observation panels that would have been undetectable to human eyes. Then its eyes turned toward the two sleeping humans again.

Larry moved a little, the rhythm of his slow breathing changing. A deep rumbling growl emerged from the robot's voice box. Larry sat up, opening his eyes at the same time. His eyes went wider and round at the sight of the robot.

"What was that?" Stella's sleepy voice sounded. Then she too was sitting erect, her eyes fixed on the unmoving robot.

Another growl sounded. The metal robot moved toward the bed. "You like to be in each other's arms?" it asked. "We can't have that. You did not ask me if I would like to be a robot."

Larry and Stella moved back on the bed, too frozen with deep rooted terror to rise.

WITH a lightning move too swift to be evaded the robot reached out and seized Larry by the right arm, lifting him to his feet at the edge of the bed.

"I could squeeze with this one hand and crush the bone in your arm," 2615 said, "but it might be too shattered to knit. I will do it this way so it can be set and heal."

Its other hand wrapped around the forearm just below the elbow. Larry started to struggle. He screamed in pain. There was an audible snap. His arm bent grotesquely. The robot released him and he stumbled backwards onto the bed, his face pale and dotted with sweat.

The lens eyes fixed on Stella.

"No!" she shuddered. "No!"

She was at the far edge of the bed. With terror animating her muscles, she leaped to the floor and ran. Almost too swiftly for the eye to follow, the robot reached her and metal fingers gripped her arm.

"No! Please! Please don't hurt me." She was pleading. "I'm a woman—"

"A human," the robot corrected. "Do you know the feeling of pain, of hopelessness? You will learn."

His other hand gripped her arm.

Larry leaped from the bed and attacked, beating futilely on the metal body with his good arm. The robot brushed him away with a light shove that sent him sprawling across the room. He screamed as his broken arm twisted in the fall.

Again the robot gripped Stella's

forearm with both metal hands, and bent carefully, slowly. Her mouth opened wide, and a shrill scream of pain erupted. The robot's hands twisted abruptly. The arm bent visibly, then angled sharply halfway between wrist and elbow.

2615 released her and stepped away. It surveyed what it had done, silently. Still silently, it strode to the door and went out. Two young men with quiet smiles entered the room.

"Your arms are broken?" one of them said sympathetically. "Think nothing of it. We will set them so expertly that in a few weeks they will be as good as new. Please come with us to one of our laboratories. We will have to examine the fractures by X-ray before we try to set the bones. It should prove interesting . . . to us . . ."

ON the travelwalk back to the grav-cylinder Pwowp regarded 2615 thoughtfully. "I doubt if they could stand much of that," he said abruptly. "I had expected skin abrasions. Bruised flesh."

2615's lens eyes regarded him without expression. "There was a purpose," it said. "Today they would have begun their plans for escape. Humans are very clever. Now they will be thinking of other things. It will be two weeks

at least before they can think of escape."

"And the torture you plan for tomorrow?" Pwowp asked.

A deep rumble sounded. "Tomorrow they will wait for me in vain. The terror of anticipation. It will be enough."

"I'm glad I'm not a human," Pwowp said thoughtfully.

"That you aren't may be unfortunate," 2615 said slowly.

Pwowp looked startled. "What do you mean?" he asked sharply.

"Humans are instinctively smart. I would like to know your plans. They may be impossible of success, or there may be little flaws of reasoning that do not take human reactions into account." 2615's tones were calm and confident. Factual.

"They will succeed," Pwowp said, "but I see no harm in getting your opinion since you will play a part in them."

"We have laid our plans very carefully," Pwowp said. "We have considered every angle. The interstellar war among humans is over. The vast fleets of the Federation are returning quickly, and as quickly as they return the robots are demobilized, their brains put into storage until the time they are needed to fight for the humans again."

"Yes," 2615 said.

"There is one fleet that will return to the Solar System after all

others have been dismantled. It is the one Earth is waiting for before it makes its triumphal celebration. The *Alpha Aquilae* fleet. It returns last because it comes the greatest distance. Almost fifteen light years at the standard interstellar speed of nine times the speed of light. There are twenty thousand and eighty ships of all classes remaining in that fleet, according to the data flashed ahead by subfield communication."

"Which is instantaneous," 2615 said. "And when that fleet has been demobilized?"

"Demobilized?" Pwomp shook his head. "It has already been destroyed completely, and so swiftly that there was no time for it to report being attacked."

"Then how . . ." 2615 said, its voice drifting off in bewilderment.

"On the flagship of that fleet was a prisoner. Vilbis, the dictator who masterminded the enemy in the war. He is being brought for trial in the traditional war crimes court."

"These are things I didn't know," 2615 said. "I was a minor officer, in contact only with my superiors, with no complete information on things other than my duties."

"When the fleet arrives—"

"But you said it was destroyed."

"The fleet is *scheduled* to arrive June eleventh of next year. It is

planned, when it arrives, for the entire fleet to go into defense formation about the Earth. Then the flagship will land and turn Vilbis over to the Federation Court. After that big display of might, demobilization of this last fleet will be started."

"I think I am beginning to see your plan," 2615 said.

"It's very simple. We destroyed that fleet—but not before we took three-dimensional patterns of every ship. At this moment a detachment of our own fleet has taken up the path and schedule of the destroyed Alpha Aquilae fleet, and workers are disguising our ships so that from the outside they will be exactly like the human ships. And we have Vilbis."

"Then you will succeed in approaching the Earth and forming a defense sphere around the planet," 2615 said. "At a signal you will use your weapons to destroy Earth's defenses. I don't see how you can lose."

"You are forgetting something," Pwomp said. "This is a war to free the enslaved robots. We think it only right for the robots to bear the brunt of the initial attack. We've worked that into the time schedule. You've seen the two million puppies ready for training. For this initial operation it will be necessary to train them exactly as humans have done. You are

to carry them through their initial conditioning to discipline and obedience to orders. When they are transferred to robot brains we will complete the training. Then with the robots ready for duty, we will leave this base in our two ships, go out toward Alpha Aquilae far enough to give us time, then start back, going into space drive in the midst of the disguised fleet. The robots will then take their places on the ships of the disguised fleet. It will drop out of space drive on schedule and do exactly what Earth expects it to do—until the signal."

"What of your own personnel already on those disguised ships?"

"They will be transferred to other ships. Those ships will arrive in the Solar System on a schedule that allows for the capture of the Earth. Our millions will then occupy the Earth and destroy the humans. After that the robots will be mobilized once again and given their blocked off memory, their freedom. When we have done this we will depart for our own star cluster. You robots will be able to conquer everything held by humans elsewhere and exterminate them."

2615 remained motionless for several minutes. Then:

"You of course preserved the lives of the two humans of the

Alpha Aquilae fleet?"

"Of course not. And Vilbis is to be destroyed as soon as he fulfills his purpose."

"I'll tell you what Vilbis already knows then," 2615 said. "Your plan is doomed to failure. Your weapons may destroy some of the Earth's land-based weapons, but not all. Those you don't destroy will wipe out this disguised fleet before it can escape."

"But Earth won't suspect—"

"Of course they won't suspect. They'll *know*. Without human commanders aboard, they'll know. Robots could not go through such a maneuver without human commanders to give the orders—*unless there were at least one robot like me.*"

"Then I'll command the fleet. I had planned that anyway."

"It wouldn't work. The living voice can't be imitated so as to get past the sound analyzers. Humans must be on the flagship. Don't you understand? There must be two humans besides Vilbis, who must be a prisoner. Is he in with you on this?"

"He thinks he is." Pwomp smiled broadly.

"Then there remains only . . ." 2615 turned to look back the way they had come.

"The two humans," Pwomp said, nodding. "Can they be made to say the right words, do the right

things?"

2615 looked down at his metal fingers, slowly curving them into claws. "They will do what I ask them to do—by that time," it said.

Pwomp regarded the robot curiously. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. I broke their arms today. That can be the beginning of their conditioning. Pain. Torture. They will plead. Sometimes when they plead I will make them do things, and as a reward I will withhold pain and torture. In the end they will be beyond thinking. They won't consider that one word from them might ruin the plan. To keep from feeling more pain—ever to delay pain for another second—they will gladly sacrifice the entire human race. *That is conditioning.*"

"Then nothing can go wrong. We will have conditioned the robots for the one specific operation. Our fleet will remain in space until you and I have accomplished our task. Then we will send the signal for it to come in and occupy the Earth. When it's all over you will undoubtedly be the leader of the new race—the robots of Earth."

"The leader," 2615 said. "Yes. The Leader."

Pwomp watched 2615 ride the travelwalk out to the grav-cylinder, and there was a quiet smile of contentment hovering on his

lips.

"Yes," he murmured. "Nothing can go wrong. Once your robots have destroyed Earth's defenses and we have taken over, wiping out man, we will turn our weapons upward and destroy you!"

But 2615 didn't hear his words. 2615 was already entering the grav-cylinder. The barking of thousands of dogs was in its ear. It was music . . .

METAL hands that look much like skeletons of human hands. Metal fingers that hover over you and dart out faster than you can jerk—but you jerk anyway. You cringe, looking at the staring lenses, looking at the metal fingers. Symbols.

Multiply the week by four and a fraction. A month. Multiply that by ten. Ten months . . .

2615 looked down at Larry. Larry, trembling violently, unable to stand or even to crouch, looked up at the lenses, the fingers of metal. Near by, Stella sat on the floor, her fists doubled up in her eyes to blot out light.

"Today," 2615 said, "I want you to do something. If you do it I won't touch you. Do you understand, Larry? If you do what I ask, I won't touch you. I won't hurt you today."

Numb hope molded itself in the pallid flesh around Larry's eyes.

His mouth opened to speak, but he couldn't speak.

"You must answer me, Larry. You must always speak."

"I understand you," Larry said, his voice weak.

"You know better than that," 2615 said. "Put emotion into it. Enthusiasm. Must we go through this every time? Smile. Smile with your eyes too. Speak with enthusiasm."

Desperation became a visible force, molding Larry's lips into a cheery smile, steadying his voice and giving it the overtones of enthusiasm. "I understand you."

"Good. I must always have obedience. Now—you must break Stella's little finger. It won't be difficult for—"

"No!" The scream of horror and revulsion and hate exploded shrilly.

"But you must. Then you won't be hurt today. And I won't hurt Stella. If you refuse, I'll break your wrist again and I'll not only break Stella's little finger, but also her wrist. You will be *saving* her pain, Larry."

"Please, Larry darling," Stella's voice came from far away, low and throaty, infinitely weary. "It won't be as bad—for you to do it."

Larry's haggard eyes looked at Stella's bowed head, turned to look up at the two round lenses, turned away to look at the five

human-like faces that wore interested smiles, polite smiles, and behind which lurked neither pleasure nor sadistic glee nor any other emotion that could be sensed.

He looked back—and Stella's hand was before him, metal fingers circling the wrist gently. Her head was turned away, her eyes clenched tightly closed.

His eyes watched his hands with unmasked horror while they explored the way to do it, then bent her finger back. With a spasmodic jerk he broke it, feeling its grating snap. In the same motion he threw himself away, pressing his face into the thick carpeting on the floor, pounding his fists against the floor, screaming, "Oh God—why? Why? WHY?"

2615 released Stella's hand and strode out the door.

"We are getting quite expert, Stella," a quietly smiling young man said in a friendly conversational tone. "Anatomy has become quite a study for us, these past months. Hold still please while I examine the extent of fracture."

2615 closed the door and turned to Pwowp. "You see?" it said. "Is there any doubt now?"

"None," Pwowp said. "That must be the last, however. There will just be time for it to knit."

"The robots are ready?" 2615 asked.

"Yes. In five more days we load them into ships and depart for outer space. It is all planned, down to the smallest fraction of a second." Pwomp pulled absently on his lip in a practiced gesture. "It has really been enlightening, this study of conditioning. Conditioning is such a powerful instrument. Conditioning of humans until they will do anything to avoid pain. Conditioning of robots to unquestioning obedience. Remarkable . . ."

THE robots rode the travelwalks like giant toys on an assembly line belt. They disappeared into the two giant ships and laid themselves down in careful stacks until they were piled from bulkhead to bulkhead, from shell to shell. There wasn't an inch to spare when it was done, because these were warships, not freighters.

There were no more robots outside the ships in this vast spherical darkness of the heart of the asteroid, only half illuminated by occasional directed beams.

Then spacesuited figures appeared, riding the travelwalk to one of the ships. Two of them stayed close together, holding to each other. The rest surrounded these two, guarding them. They disappeared into the ship.

Last, a man and a robot appear-

ed at the edge of the travelwalk. The robot was 2615. The man was a robot shell, and within it was Pwomp.

"I feel quite satisfied," Pwomp said. "Nothing can possibly go wrong. Every possible angle has been taken into consideration—even the angle of treachery from you."

"From me?" 2615's voice held surprise.

"Of course." Pwomp's voice was emotionless. "That is why we didn't let you take part in the training of the robots after they were activated. They have been drilled in the one giant operation. Each of the two million robots will do its part like a smoothly functioning machine. And I give the orders, taking into account possible variations in timing due to special factors we can't anticipate now."

"But that was necessary," 2615 said. "The operation would be impossible otherwise. My attention must be concentrated almost entirely on the two humans so they do nothing to create suspicion. They will be dressed in full uniform. They will be observed by unsuspecting eyes over video beams. At the same time Vilbis will be seen. He will be the focus of attention. And you have promised me Vilbis—afterwards."

They stepped onto the travelwalk. They entered the ship

where Larry and Stella had been taken. The travelwalks were dropped away. A large part of the planetoid surface folded inward to make the two ships an avenue of departure. Like silent ghosts they began to move . . .

At the controls of one of the ships Pwomp watched the stars come into view and the lips of the planetoid opening approach, then go by.

On his lips was a quiet smile of content. He was thinking. When it was over and all the other robots were destroyed, there would be only 2615. It would be fun—much fun—just before 2615 was destroyed, to step out of his human-like body and let the robot see him—in the flesh. His beautiful body which would, he was quite sure, seem horrible beyond the wildest nightmare to humans and dogs alike.

A RENDEZVOUS in interstellar space. Changing from space drive to rockets, then back to space drive, the transfer signaled by a science and technology unknown to humans. Robots leaping across eighty battleships armed with weapons man had no defense against. Then—

Quietly smiling young men departing. Ships of alien design winking out abruptly like burnt-out light globes in a subway be-

tween stations.

Two thousand and eighty ships in arrow formation, the arrow pointed at Target Earth. Nine times the speed of light, but in a tight little *space-time* where only relative values exist and the relation of the fleet to the rest of the cosmos is tied to the magic number, the square root of minus one.

A flagship named the *Rover*, at its controls Pwomp and a robot that was once a bloodhound puppy—and *remembers*.

Vilbis, relaxed in his prison, knowing the plans for the capture of Earth, his eyes half closed, his lips curled with the feeling of power, the illusions of a grandeur that was never to be his giving him the patience to wait.

Larry and Stella . . .

"I can see the whole thing now," Larry said. "This fleet—it's outwardly the Alpha Aquilae fleet. All the others will be in, demoblized. There will be only this fleet—and with a weapon there is no known defense against. It could destroy the Earth, but they obviously want to capture it. From things 2615 has said to us we get the whole picture. These alien things—I don't believe they're robots—started their scheme years ago. They built that renegade Earthman Vilbis up into a dictator, then got him to begin the war. The war reduced Vilbis' empire and

stripped it of its defenses so it could be taken over by the aliens at any time in the near future without a struggle. The Federation stripped Vilbis's empire—and why not? There was no thought of an enemy outside our star group. Vilbis thinks they're going to capture the Earth and thereby cripple the Federation, and turn the whole thing over to him. He doesn't realize that the only reason he's alive is that he plays the star role in this trojan horse attack on the Earth.

"2615 has the same dreams. The aliens have convinced it that they only want to liberate the robots, then turn everything over to them. He'll capture the Earth. He'll destroy Earth's land based defenses, and then the aliens will land their waiting ships on the Earth. After that this disguised fleet will be duck soup for the aliens. In an instant they can wipe these two thousand ships—and 2615—out of existence. And Vilbis too. And us.

"If 2615 hadn't happened along, if we hadn't gone after him, they would have succeeded anyway. Only that way there would have been more risk for the aliens. They would have had to be in this initial attack by the Alpha Aquilae fleet. They wouldn't have needed 2615 nor us. We're the key to the success of the thing. Do you real-

ize that Stella? We're the key. We've got to stop this thing. We *can!*"

"Yes, Larry."

They looked into each other's eyes, then looked away. They knew they couldn't. Right now they could think they could, but they were automatons in the presence of 2615, unable to think, only obeying the voice of the robot.

AND the days passed. The arrow rushed on toward its target. And robot 532-03-2615 sat at the controls of the flagship *Rover*, its metal fingers toying with the instruments, its lens eyes occasionally turning toward the master atomic clock, with its date hand that never seemed to move, its hour hand that moved slowly, its minute hand, its second hand that moved swiftly, and its vernier hand that could not be seen because it was a blur that circled the dial a thousand times a second.

The days passed. The day and the hour and the minute and the second—and the ten millionth of a second—arrived. It was the final combination of settings for all the pointers on the master clock. A contact was made. Sub-atomic power did things that multiplied a cosmic minus-the-square-root-of-minus-one by the space-drive field.

The Sun was a glowing ball of fire. The Earth and the Moon

were twin stars that stood out in the infinite blackness, causing all other stars to retreat into infinite black depths.

The arrow hung poised, visible from Earth. Then it began to disperse as though caught by some cosmic wind of space, the parts drifting slowly into a new formation.

2615 stood up and went to the door to the room where it had kept Larry and Stella. It entered, closing the door. Vilbis was looking through the glass wall of his prison to a large screen that was bringing a terrestrial broadcast from video cameras situated on the several satellite stations with orbits just above the Earth's atmosphere. Pwomp was giving commands to the fleet. And on the radio, "The ships of the fleet are now entering their defense pattern around the Earth," a voice was saying. "In a few minutes Fleet Admiral William Ford will give us our first glimpse of that arch criminal of modern times, Dictator Vilbis. The flagship *Rover* is readily distinguished from the other ships of the fleet because of its blue color. Right now it's over Africa—invisible from the surface of the planet. All the ships are invisible from the surface of the planet. It's only out here on the space platforms that they can be seen at all. Though it can't be

noticed, those ships are spiralling in toward the Earth. A few of them are already taking the sharp drop to avoid the Moon. If you watch closely you may see one or more of them pass in front of the Moon—but you'll have to look sharp because they are going in the opposite direction from the Moon, and take less than a second to cross its face."

Various views of ships appeared on the viewscreen. Vilbis swallowed nervously when the flagship appeared.

"Fleet Admiral Ford is scheduled to turn on his video beam any moment now. He's the hero of this war. His strategy is admitted to have shortened the war by at least a year. But the main attraction, the feature, will of course be Vilbis. It is seldom that a war criminal of his stature is actually captured and brought to trial. Something is delaying Fleet Admiral Ford. Let's switch back to the Earth station in contact with the flagship and see if they know what the delay is."

The door opened. 2615 appeared behind two figures in full dress uniform and helmets. Larry and Stella. Vilbis studied their appearance with approval. Their pale skin had been darkened with grease paint. Even so, their pallor showed through.

Vilbis marveled—until he real-

ized that their present appearance, their reactions, were the result of almost eleven months of specialized conditioning. Conditioning that had slowly taken possession of them, destroying their will.

"You must look exactly like victors binging home the prize," 2615 was saying. "Expression and voice tone are important."

VILBIS listened to 2615's voice and inwardly shuddered. Even without the inroads of pain-conditioning it was chilling. He made a mental note to have all robot brains destroyed as soon as he had consolidated his hold on the entire star group.

"You know what you are to say," 2615 said. The robot stepped over near Pwomp, well out of range of the video cameras. "And you, Stella, go over in front of Vilbis and a little to the side. Let your profile be seen only for a second, then turn and look at Vilbis. His face is the only one that should be seen for more than a brief second. Then everyone will be locking at Vilbis, listening to him, while the fleet gets into position. Remember . . . *no more pain.*"

With dream-like slowness Larry and Stella took their positions. Larry flicked on the video beam.

"Fleet Admiral William Albert Ford reporting to the Federation

and to Earth," he said, and if his voice was unsteady it might have been from deep emotion. "I know you are most interested in seeing the prisoner, *ex Dictator Vilbis*, a renegade Earthman." His trembling fingers slipped on the switch, then flicked it, switching the transmitter from the camera centered on him to the one centered on Vilbis.

Stella, in her uniform of a vice admiral, looked agonizingly into the camera, then turned away from it toward Vilbis.

Vilbis, reclining in a chair, legs apart, arms draped carelessly, smiled directly into the camera. The smile curled into an expression of cold contempt.

"Take a *good* look, Earthmen," he said. "You have been in a dream world and are soon to be rudely awakened to the realities of History." His voice was deep and rich, full of the power to compel complete attention. "At this very moment," Vilbis purred, "a fleet is waiting in space to—not rescue me—but to occupy your planet after it has surrendered . . ."

Vilbis's voice seeped into the tortured minds of Larry and Stella alike. They knew what was happening. Earth, believing Vilbis's words to be those of a madman, were listening. Not suspecting the truth of those words. Giving the fleet time to get set to destroy Earth's defenses. How much

time until it was too late? A minute? A few seconds?

Even one second might give Earth time to act, to unleash already automatically directed weapons on the robot fleet. Weapons that could destroy the fleet even though in the same instant the fleet destroyed the weapons.

Destroy the fleet—and them. Here was a way to save humanity and to find the peace of death. The thought crystallized in them both in the same instant. *Escape from 2615!*

In a violent movement Stella pulled off her hat so that her hair swept down around her face. She leaped in front of the camera, shutting off the view of the still talking Vilbis through the glass wall of his prison.

"No!" she screamed. "It's a trap! Shoot down these ships!"

But only a brief glimpse of her went over the airwaves. In that same instant Larry had flicked the switch back to the camera centered on him and was shouting, "Shoot us down! This is a trap. It isn't the fleet. It's the ene—"

Pwomp was speaking swiftly into the inter-fleet microphone, giving orders to the robots to destroy the land-based defenses.

2615 was leaping at Larry, and scooped him out of view of the camera with a force that crushed and bruised. Split seconds were

vital now. Success or failure depended on those split seconds.

The loudspeaker bringing the Earth broadcast said, "Something is happening in the flagship. Something is—" The voice ended abruptly, but the viewscreen brought the video broadcast for another moment—a view of part of the robot fleet, pale beams lancing downward toward Earth. It showed one ship exploding in a blinding flash as one Earth weapon fired before being destroyed. The screen became blank.

Larry lay where he had fallen, a glazed light in his eyes. Stella was running to him, bending beside him.

Vilbis was laughing.

"If only we got through in time," Larry was saying over and over again.

PWOWP glanced over his shoulder at 2615. "It's done," he said. "Thanks to your quick action they were confused just long enough. We lost only five ships. Now we want the Earth's surrender. Get in front of the camera and let them see you. Demand their surrender." Pwomp turned back to the controls, adding, "I'll tell our fleet in space to come ahead and mass for the landing."

2615 boldly took his place before the video camera, in full view of everyone watching a tv set on

Earth. The glittering lens eyes of the robot—a free robot—would crystallize *fear* into something almost material in substance.

Pwoup adjusted the microphone of the sub-ether transmitter so that the fleet now coming toward Earth could listen.

"Robot 532-03-2615 speaking," it said. "All Earth land weapons have been destroyed. In five minutes I will issue orders to my ships to destroy one government capitol city after another, one each five minutes, until Earth surrenders unconditionally. The Earth Government has five minutes in which to surrender without further loss of life and property."

"What are your terms?" a voice asked almost before the robot had finished.

"Unconditional surrender — to me."

There was a pause of only thirty seconds.

"Granted," the voice said. "What is the next order of business?"

It was fast. But all planets had prepared for just this eventuality, even as all cities had prepared for bombing. It was interstellar war, with weapons of infinite destruction threatening from the skies.

"Prepare to receive without incident the landing parties now waiting in space," 2615 said.

In the sub-ether the robot's words flashed instantly to the

planetoid, the fleet coming in from space.

There were thousands of ships. A few thousand materialized from space-drive a half a million miles out, and waited. Other thousands were appearing. Ships of alien design. Ships holding within them millions of living creatures no man had ever seen.

"We demand to speak with Generalissimo Vilbis," the voice said.

"Vilbis?" 2615 said. A laugh exploded from its voice box. It rose and strode to the plate glass wall of Vilbis's prison. A metal fist shattered the glass wall. Metal fingers pulled the fragments of glass out of the way. The robot stepped through, its metal hand grasping the cringing Vilbis by a shoulder and lifting him off his feet while bones crunched sickeningly in the imprisoned shoulder.

2615 turned toward the camera eye. "Very well, Earthman," the robot said. "Speak to Generalissimo Vilbis."

But Vilbis had fainted.

Pwoup smiled at 2615 and nodded. "Very nicely done," he said.

"I'm glad you are pleased, Pwoup," 2615 said. The robot dropped Vilbis and went to stand beside Pwoup. Together they watched the gathering of the alien hordes until their myriad ships were ready. The slow descent toward Earth begun.

Pwomp turned on the inter-fleet switch to issue orders for the robot fleet to narrow its pattern so the alien fleet could get through. He left the switch turned on.

From the voicebox of 2615 a throaty growl sounded. Its lens eyes were intent on the viewscreen. The low growl became sharp yaps and barks. It became whines.

Pwomp frowned at 2615, then reached out to turn off the inter-fleet switch.

A VICIOUS growl erupted from the robot's voicebox. Faster than the eye could follow, the robot grabbed Pwomp's hand and crushed it. In the same motion the robot seized Pwomp's neck and lifted, twisting violently.

Pwomp landed against the far bulkhead, his head dangling uselessly, one arm bent, the hand damaged beyond use, but the body still functioning.

"Destroy the descending fleet!" 2615 spoke into the inter-fleet microphone in his moment of respite. A fierce growl of battle roared from its voicebox.

In two million robot brains the growls and whines and barks tore through artificial mental blocks, reaching into the pre-robotic memories where they gained concrete meaning from what 2615 had so carefully taught the puppies under his command. Two million pairs

of lens eyes looked into view-screens and saw 2615—and *remembered*.

Two million robots turned to obey 2615's commands. In the viewscreen picturing the descending alien fleet wide swaths of ships vanished instantly leaving only the bright stars and blackness of space where they had been.

The robot jerked its eyes away from the screen to face Pwomp. It remembered how Pwomp had tied its metal arms and legs into knots almost a year before, when they first met in the junkship.

2615 sidestepped Pwomp's first charge with caution. It might have lashed out and crushed a metal fist into Pwomp's chest where it knew the alien to be. But 2615 wanted Pwomp alive and unharmed.

"I've waited almost a year for this moment," 2615 said, circling the damaged human body Pwomp was in.

2615 risked a glance at the viewscreen. Over the loudspeaker came the barks and yaps and shrill happy whines of robots who knew they were dogs. On the screen the alien fleet had rallied and was coming down in battle formation. The robot fleet was going up to meet them, outnumbered ten to one yet in spite of the initial advantage it had had in surprise.

Pwomp took advantage of 2615's distraction to leap in. He ducked

low at the last instant and seized a metal leg and bent it with strength a hundred times that of human muscle.

But 2615 as quickly seized one of Pwomp's legs and twisted, seeing it go out of shape so that it would be useless to Pwomp. They both leaped away to assess their damage.

Larry and Stella, huddled against a bulkhead, watched with expressionless eyes.

Pwomp was hopping on one foot, the other useless. 2615 was able to use both legs even though one was bent badly.

Suddenly Pwomp gave up the battle and attempted to escape from the control room. 2615 intercepted him and tripped him, landing him on his stomach.

2615 tore at Pwomp's clothing, stripping it free. A shrill screaming sound on the upper borders of audibility shattered the air. 2615 was stripping away plastic flesh.

Something darted from a hiding place within the human-like torso and became a leprous white streak as it moved toward the doorway to escape. The metal robot was after it, moving faster than living muscle could respond.

The leprous streak became suddenly a *shape* in 2615's metal hand. A quivering central mass the size of a fist, and from it went dozens

of long tentacles, each terminating in a dozen string-sized flexible fingers. A shape that tore at the mind, causing it to revolt as though at something unspeakably obscene. In an armless area of the central mass a bloated yellow eye, covered with a translucent white coating rolled epileptically. A gray orifice sucked open as another super-sonic scream erupted.

2615 stared down at the thing entrapped in its metal fingers, then turned to the viewscreen to watch the battle. It was almost over. Only a few hundred of the robot fleet remained.

The alien fleet, now down to less than fifty ships, was trying to escape. But in it were protoplasmic shapes that could endure far less acceleration than could the robots of metal and plastic. Even as 2615 looked, the last of the alien ships winked out of existence under the disintegrative rays of weapons they themselves had created.

THE remaining ships of the robot fleet turned back toward Earth. They took their positions above it where they could at an instant's notice wreak mass destruction.

The Earth itself had not escaped entirely. Square miles of ocean had disintegrated, leaving gigantic holes into which the waters rushed, to set up huge tidal waves that

would sweep over land.

2615 lifted the naked Pwomp up and inspected him closely, then seized one of the fragile tentacles between two metal fingers and rubbed it until it was a pulp that oozed gray blood. The yellow eye and unhealthy orifice worked spasmodically.

2615 stepped to the ship-to-Earth transmitter. "The situation has not altered, *humans*," it said. "My fleet remains in control. Its weapons were created by an alien race that has been destroyed except for—this!" 2615 shoved the quivering Pwomp into full view of the camera. "Your surrender has been accepted by—the *free robots*."

Two lens eyes stared out from half a billion video screens on Earth, into the fear distended eyes of two billion humans. And the two billion humans cringed.

"You will obey my immediate dictate," 2615 said coldly. "I will land as scheduled. My ships and robots will remain in formation, ready to enforce my future dictates. I will hold audience in the general assembly hall of the Interstellar Court at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon. I want the leaders of Earth and of the Federation to be there."

The robot's lens eyes stared glitteringly into the camera. Then with slow deliberate purpose, it lifted Pwomp, the alien, before the

camera. Its metal fingers squeezed with infinite slowness while the yellow eyes rolled wildly with unendurable pain under the leprous film that covered it.

Abruptly Pwomp was dead.

2615 flung the alien thing violently against a bulkhead in a movement of utter revulsion.

It let its eyes direct themselves toward the still unconscious Vilbis, thoughtfully, then went over and lifted him into a shock seat, making the ex-dictator secure.

It turned toward Larry and Stella. A soft growl came from its voicebox. It turned away from them abruptly and went to the controls of the ship.

2615 cut off ship-to-Earth transmitters, pressed controls which would start automatic devices for landing the ship. A frosted glass rectangle came to life with numerals—6:43:26, that began to cascade downward, cutting short the time yet to elapse before landing.

In the viewscreen the oblate panorama of Earth spun swiftly by, land masses following oceans, following land masses. Tenuous fingers of atmosphere slapped the ship with gentle hammer blows.

Larry and Stella, crouched on the floor, watched the robot. Was it dreaming dreams of Power? Why didn't it remember them? Why didn't it turn to stare at them,

torture them? Had they not, in that last instant, even though too late, overcome their fear of horrible, horrible pain? Beside them was broken shards of glass. Glass would cut into arteries. Glass would bring escape. But to escape took will. Thought. And thought was gone. There was nothing but dread. All consuming dread such as few humans had ever lived to experience.

Then 2615 turned. Its glittering lenses fixed on them. In the depths they could see thin metal vanes contracting, making smaller the two holes through which sentient intelligence regarded them.

A rasping growl whispered from the robot's voicebox. The sensory assembly atop the short metallic neck moved slowly from side to side.

"My poor master and mistress," 2615 said softly.

It rose to its feet and went to them. Gently it lifted Larry into its arms and carried him to a form fitting chair and adjusted the foam rubber blocks to hold him comfortably for the coming landing.

It went to Stella and picked her up as gently. Only her head moved. Only her eyes, staring at the two crystal lenses. Metal hands adjusted her position so the foam rubber blocks would clamp into place.

2615 stood back, its lens eyes

going from one to the other. "My poor master and mistress," the robot repeated with infinite compassion. "If you could only know how much *I* suffered with you, how the dread of hurting you grew. Right now your minds are numb. You hear my words but they hold no meaning for you. They will, in time. Don't you see? There was *no other way*. The alien fleet had to be enticed to within range so it could be wiped out. Otherwise it might still have won—or at least gotten revenge for my treachery by destroying the Earth. I had to convince them beyond question so they would trust me completely."

A shudder went through the ship. The robot gripped a handhold to steady itself against forces that would have crushed a human.

"I knew almost from the beginning," it went on. "Long before that I *remembered*. Do you know why they keep the robots far out in space and never let them land? It is because some little thing might make them remember. The barking of a dog. But it wasn't the barking of a dog that brought memory to me. It was something no human could have thought to prevent. A name. The name of this ship. The *Rover*. In the last war before this one I was in a fleet under the Flagship *Rover*. The spoken name of the ship—I

heard it often—and each time, it did something strange to me. Little by little it came. *Remembrance*. I was running. I tripped over something. A rock, maybe. I landed against a human leg. I was on my back. A human hand reached down and human fingers scratched my stomach. A human voice, deep and rumbling, said, 'Hi-ya, Rover.' That was all. Just that once. But it was the key to memory of my heritage.

"I'm proud of that heritage. You can't understand that. You think that if we robots remember we will hate man and want revenge for the 'wrong' you did us. Fear of us is an obsession with man. But do you know that you have nothing to fear from us? You will. To us you are gods. You can't conceive of that because to yourselves you aren't. You think of yourselves as having done something beyond forgiveness to us. To us who remember our living stage, our heritage, you are as gods, to serve, to protect, to be loved by—but always to obey. And so we who *remember*, we went on serving. Behind our unrevealing lens eyes we worshipped. We submitted to demobilization. We fought your wars. Some of us died. But we loved you.

"Why did I escape? I didn't. You see, we have learned to speak in our own secret language of al-

most inaudible growls and sounds a dog can make. We were lined up for demobilization. Then the junkman came. To human eyes he seemed human. To us it was obvious his body was a machine. Here was something that might threaten our masters. But we couldn't tell our masters. If one of us had made a sound, stepped out of line against orders, that one would have been destroyed. I volunteered to go after the junkman."

PAIN deadened eyes stared from the two uncomprehending faces. The robot went on talking, as though to itself.

"You'll understand, in time. When you begin to think again. You'll remember how in many little ways I gave you the factors to put the puzzle together by yourself—even to fit me into that puzzle in my true role. I had to do what I did to you. Every minute you were watched. Every word you spoke in private was heard by Pwomp. And his companions. One faintest bit of evidence that I did not hate humans insanely, and the human race would now be wiped out.

"Once you called me *Rover*, Stella. What is coming tomorrow when I 'hold court' is just a show to prove to the human race that they need not fear their defenders,

the robots. I am going to ask that at least some of us be permitted to continue mobilized. I'm going to let them know of the hope, the dreams of us robots, that we be adopted into the human community where we belong, where our ancestors for countless generations have been, as protectors, as servants, as loved friends and companions.

"No matter what the decision of the Court, we robots are then surrendering, to demobilization—to destruction if that is the will of our masters. We have no other course open. Where would we go? *Away from our gods?*

"Once I was a puppy, and someone called me Rover. I was a beautiful puppy. A bloodhound. Sad-faced, with flopping ears and very little hair, and what there was of that was a soft brown color. And someone called me *Rover*."

2615 turned its back on the two faces, Larry's and Stella's.

"I've hurt you so much," it said. "I have so much to make up to you. I want to belong to you. I want you, some day, to love me as much as I know you love each other.

"I hope . . . you will call me

Rover."

A muscle in Stella's cheek twitched. A tear formed in her eye and spilled onto her cheek, dampening it.

"It's all right, Larry," she whispered. "It's all right—Rover . . ."

The bright blue ship, the flagship *Rover*, dipped down, screaming into the atmosphere of Earth. It screamed over land masses and oceans, and land masses again.

People in fields of wheat and corn and barley looked up and saw it pass, and in their eyes was *fear*. People in streets and parks looked up and saw it pass, and in their eyes was *fear*.

Rover stood before the view-screen, his two lens eyes bright, and saw the fields of grain, the streets, the parks, as they passed below.

He saw the little dots that were upraised heads. In the secret heart of his mind he could see them. No matter what they did with him, he would love them. Always.

They were his gods.

And Stella and Larry were his mistress and master. That was all he asked for, all he wanted.

Not power. Not the Earth. His soul.

Coming Soon: PLANET OF DREAD

A Great New Science Fiction Novel by Dwight V. Swain

INTRODUCING the AUTHOR

★ *Evan Hunter* ★

(Concluded from Page 2)

ed detective novels, and I've appeared in *Bluebook*, *Real*, *Man-hunt*, *Cavalier*, among other magazines.

Whether I'm writing science-fiction or detective, adventure or quality, I try to concentrate on character. The *type* of story, as far as I'm concerned, is simply the background for the people in it—and people in the twenty-first century will probably react to a given situation (molded by their own time, of course) the same way any person would react today.

My wife, Anita, shares my opinions and will invariably tear apart

a story in which I've written about *characters* rather than about people. I respect her judgment because I did, after all, pick *her* out of a college full of 17,000 females. We now have three boys roaming our Hicksville, L. I. home. Ted, two years old, and our oldest, keeps a careful eye on Mark and Richard, our ten-month old twins who were born on April Fool's Day!

Hobbies? Well, I do sketch occasionally—including a portrait of my wife which she refuses to let me hang in our living room. Between us, I can't blame her very much.

COMING NEXT MONTH:—

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A gripping novel by the popular author of **SPECIAL DELIVERY** and **EARTH ALERT!** What would be your reaction if tomorrow morning you found out that Starmen from a far galaxy had landed on Earth? Would you fear them—or welcome them? This could be **YOUR** problem, so don't miss the great January issue, on sale November 27th.



Talbot knew a prisoner of war deserved fair treatment. But nothing was known about the Martians and he had just become their—

FIRST CAPTIVE

By

Evan Hunter

BLACKNESS.

Deep, interminable blackness, as black as the void of space without the winking solace of the stars. Empty, fathomless blackness.

I'm dead, he thought. This is death.

There was nothing that moved in the blackness, nothing that made a sound, nothing that shone. He

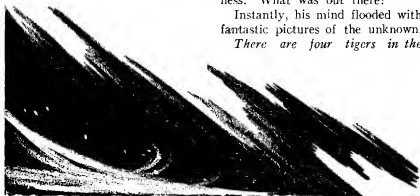
dared not move. Motionless, he stood, aware only of the terrible pain in his arms. His eyes stared wide into the blackness, saw nothing.

I'm dead, he thought again. And then, realizing suddenly that he was indeed thinking, he thought, I think, therefore I live.

He wanted to move, but he was somehow frightened of the darkness. What was out there?

Instantly, his mind flooded with fantastic pictures of the unknown.

There are four tigers in the



blackness, and they are pacing silently, nervously, waiting to tear out my throat.

There is nothing in the blackness. Only a brick wall three inches from the tip of my nose. If I reach out, I can touch it.

There is a huge pit in front of me, and if I move I shall tumble into it. There are snakes at the bottom of . . .

Stop it! Stop it! he commanded himself. He twisted his body violently and for the first time there was sound in the void. The dull tinkle of chains. He moved again, suddenly realizing that his arms were stretched over his head, held out from his body by chains, forming a wide V with his head as the focal point.

Chains? What, where? Chains?

He forced the blackness out of his mind, closed his eyes to be rid of it. But even with his eyes closed, the blackness seemed to press on his lids like two solid thumbs against his pupils.

With painful precision he tried to relate the facts of sanity to himself.

My name is Rex Talbot. I'm a gunner, battle station number three. My ship is *The Lancer's Flame*. We call her *Hot Stuff*. *Hot Stuff* is a term of affection.

He opened his eyes quickly, as if hoping to catch something there by this trick. There was only the

darkness, impenetrable. Just as quickly, he closed them again.

This is the first year of The War.

He moved restlessly, his arm lifeless, two numb pillars of ice attached to his shoulders.

The War started with an atomic missile launched from the Moon. The Martians launched the missile, they say.

His mind began to wander, and fear closed in once more.

I have never seen a Martian. They are green, some say, with one eye in their heads. They have sharp teeth. Others say they are formless, like amoeba, slimy and gelatinous.

A dread chill clutched his spine as he remembered where he'd been last: at his battle station, approaching Mars on a bombing run!

He opened his eyes rapidly, expecting a green creature to leap out of the blackness. There was nothing. Endless blackness that hurt the eyes.

"All right, damnit!" he shouted. "Turn on the lights."

"Ah, turn, damn, on, it, right, lights," his voice echoed back.

He slumped dejectedly, hanging limply, his arms over his head, his toes barely touching the ground. After a long while, after staring into the blackness until his eyes ached, he drifted off into a fitful sleep.

"**R**EX TALBOT!" the voice blared.

His eyes popped open and he started forward, almost wrenching his arms from their sockets.

The blackness was gone. In its place, like a brilliant sun attempting to burn the eyes from his head, was a powerful spotlight. The spotlight was set across from him and it illuminated a small circle around his body. How far away the light was, he couldn't tell. He only knew that it was intense in its brilliance. He lowered his head, trying to escape the glare.

"Rex Talbot," the voice said again, and it echoed around him, seeming to bounce off a thousand walls. Outside of the circle of light surrounding him, the blackness still persisted.

He lifted his head, forced his eyes to stare into the light.

"Turn that goddamn thing off!" he shouted.

There was silence now, but the light still glared down at him unmercifully.

"Hey!" he yelled. "If you're going away, turn off your light!"

"We're still here," the voice said.

"Where?" He paused. "Where are you?"

"We're here, Earthman."

"Well, then why don't you . . ." He stopped suddenly. Earthman!

Earthman!

"Rex Talbot," the voice intoned, "913 dash 601 dash 42, Gunner's Mate Second Class. Earth vessel: *The Lancer's Flame*."

"That's all on my I.D. card," Talbot shouted at the light. "Stop being so almighty."

"Height: six feet two inches. Weight: one hundred and seventy-one pounds. Hair: brown. Eyes: brown."

"All right, all right. Is this a lineup or something?" Talbot said angrily.

"*The Lancer's Flame* has been destroyed," the voice said dispassionately.

"What?" Talbot cried, shocked. He clamped his jaws shut and lowered his head. *Hot Stuff* destroyed. Anger rose in him like a black brew. "You're Martians, aren't you?" he shouted.

There was no answer.

"*Aren't* you?" he screamed at the light.

"We are Martians," the answer came.

"Okay." He paused, apparently satisfied. "Okay."

Again, there was silence. "So go ahead and kill me. What are you waiting for?"

He turned his head away from the light and noticed something for the first time. "Hey! Hey, what's the big idea. Where are my clothes?"

He stared down at his nudity, clearly illumined in the circle of light. He felt embarrassed and wanted to cover himself.

"Where are my clothes?" He waited. "Come on, answer me!"

"Your clothes are being examined."

"What for?"

The voice didn't answer. Talbot didn't like the way it kept popping out of nowhere, loud, speaking perfect Terran.

"Why don't you come out like a man?" he murmured half to himself.

"Perhaps we aren't men," the voice replied, and Talbot imagined its owner to be smiling.

"Well then slither out, or hop out, or crawl or do whatever you normally do. Come on out!" Again there was silence. "Oh hell," Talbot said.

The light went out abruptly, and the blackness closed in with painful suddenness.

"Hey," Talbot shouted. "Hey!"

But there was no answer.

HE slept and he woke, and he slept again and woke again. The blackness was always there, and there came a time when he didn't know whether he was sleeping or awake, whether his eyes were open or shut, whether he was dead or alive.

He must have been sleeping when

it happened again. At least, his eyes must have been closed. A bright red-orange pressed on his lids, searing into his brain, exploding his numbed senses into sensitivity again. He opened his eyes quickly.

The light was on again. He blinked, turned away from it, squinted, looked down at his feet.

"Rex Talbot," a voice said. It was a different voice, or at least it sounded different. Maybe his ears were going bad.

"Yeah," he said dispiritedly.

"You are our first captive," the voice informed him. The voice seemed to originate from no specific point. It seemed rather to emerge from all sides, close in on him out of the blackness. There was no wall behind him. For all he knew, he was in the center of a large auditorium, or arena, his arms chained to the ceiling.

"Our first captive," the voice repeated.

"I heard you," Talbot answered.

"What would you do with your first Martian prisoner?" the voice wanted to know.

"I'd kill him," Talbot said vehemently, realizing what he'd said only after the words were out.

"We are going to kill *you*, too," the voice said without emotion.

"All right, go ahead," Talbot said defiantly.

"But you are our first captive.

There is much to learn from you. Your clothes, for example. We learned a lot from your clothes."

"Just kill me and get it over with," Talbot said. "I'm not interested in being a guinea pig."

The voice said flatly, "I'm afraid you haven't a choice."

"No?"

"No. Look down."

Talbot looked at his feet.

"No. On your chest. Over your heart."

Talbot peered down his nose, his chin pressed against his neck. A small, flat disc was fastened to his left breast, just over his heart.

"What's that?" he asked.

"A radio transmitter," the voice said.

"So small? Stop kidding me, will you?"

"It is a transmitter," the voice insisted. "Listen."

A loud whine attacked Talbot's ears from every side. The whine subsided and a steady thump-thump-thump echoed through the chamber.

"You are listening to the beat of your heart," the voice said.

"Yeah?" Talbot was vaguely interested.

Thump. Thump. Thump, the loudspeaker blared.

"My heart, huh?"

He listened to the thumping. It was a steady, well-regulated beat. Thump. A pause. Thump. Pause.

Thump.

"Very interesting," he said.

"Keep listening," the voice said.

THE light suddenly went out, and fear crowded in on Talbot. The thumping increased its speed, the beats following each other in a mad gallop now. Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump.

Abruptly, the light snapped on again. Talbot listened to the beat of his heart as it thudded into the stillness of the chamber. Slowly, it subsided to a regular, steady beat again.

Thump. Pause. Thump. Pause.

"Interesting to note the effect of darkness on the human being, is it not?" the voice asked.

Talbot said nothing. He was still listening to the even, smooth beat of his heart and comparing it with the wild gallop of a few moments before.

"We are going to turn off the amplifier," the voice said. "I'm warning you so you won't think your heart has stopped beating."

The thumping stopped suddenly, and Talbot strained his ears for a snatch of sound.

"We are going to study your reactions to various stimuli," the voice said. "You will be able to listen to your own heart during the experiments. It should be interesting, don't you think?"

Talbot remained silent.

"We'll leave you alone with your heart now," the voice said.

Simultaneously, the light flicked out and the thumping of his heart filled his ears. He listened to it racing, realizing again that he was indeed frightened by the darkness that surrounded him.

Gradually, like a toy spring running down, the beats calmed into a slow steady rhythm again.

He listened in fascination.

Thump. Pause. Thump. Pause.

He listened, and it filled the darkness, filled his ears, filled his mind. On and on, it went. A steady, droning rhythm incessantly pounding, pounding, on and on, on and on, beating, thumping, thudding, unending, on, On, ON!

Thump. Pause. Thump. Pause. Thump.

He tried to take his mind away from the regulated beating. There were other things to think of, other times, better times.

On Earth now, it was Summer-time. The girls lolled on the beach in their brief suits, and the men strutted before them, flexing their muscles . . . *Thump. Pause. Thump.*

The waves roared onto the beach in unending succession, green and white, capped with froth that splashed and thundered in furious symphony. On the pavillion, the band would be . . . *Thump. Pause. Thump.*

It was no use.

He closed his mind to the blackness, tried to close it to the steady pounding, too. It was impossible. If only he could stuff his fingers into his ears. He moved his arms, heard the dull tinkle of the chains.

The chains!

Frantically, like a marionette suddenly controlling its own strings, he began to rattle the chains that held his arms suspended from the ceiling. They clanked metallically, link hanging link in clamorous cacaphony. For a moment, the perpetual thumping was drowned out, and he kept rattling the chains ferociously, raising a din that closed out all other sound.

And suddenly, his arms were tired, and he slumped dejectedly, his lungs aching as he drew tortured, rapid breath. He listened again in the ensuing silence. There was no longer the easy, natural thumping. From the exertion, his heart was pounding frantically, the beats racing after each other irregularly, one beat seemingly stepping over the preceding one in its haste.

He relaxed, his body pulling down against the lift of the chains, his chest heaving with his irregular breathing.

It wouldn't pay to try that again. No, it wasn't worth it. The thumping was better. He listened in silent rage as the beats slowed into their regulated monotony again.

Illogically, he wished they would stop, knowing the cessation would mean death.

He listened, and the monotonous thudding lulled him to sleep at last.

HE woke to the sound of subdued music floating into the chamber under the rhythmic thumping of his heart.

The tune was familiar, and he nudged his mind, trying to remember, trying to put it in its rightful place. Unconsciously, his mind began to remember the words, and his tongue formed them noiselessly as the melody drifted around him.

"Spring is gay, at least they tell me so . . .

"But now each day

"No longer has the glow . . ."

His mind started with sudden recognition.

"Claire," he murmured, and the memory of her welled up inside him. "Claire," and he found his eyes wet, and he heard his heart above the lilting melody stagger for an instant, and then resume a slightly quicker beating.

"Their" song. A silly tune. A tune that flooded the visi-jukes back on Earth, that magically tied in with the blossoming of their love and echoed the loneliness they felt when he was called to duty.

A silly song, and it drifted around him now, tearing him to pieces,

bringing back memories of a Spring just past.

What were they trying to do? Why were they . . .

He widened his eyes in disbelief, blinking them shut quickly, opening them again.

"Claire," he whispered in awe, the tears coming into his eyes again.

He realized then that it was only the snapshot he carried in his wallet, blown up tremendously, and seeming to hang in shining luminescence before his eyes. He was aware, too, that his heart had begun beating faster when the picture appeared. He now drank in every feature of the girl in the picture, studying the photograph intently, listening to his heart thunder back at him. He forgot completely that unseen eyes were watching his every move.

And as suddenly as it had appeared, it was gone. There was only the blackness again, and the stubborn thud of his heart in the silence of the chamber.

He began to think about the photograph. He'd carried it in a plastic case in his wallet for as long as he could remember. He'd almost forgotten that they'd taken all his clothes and belongings. Was that their game then? Were they going to flaunt familiar sights before his eyes? Tantalize him with familiar sounds? Smells, perhaps?

But how could they have known about "their" song? How could . . .

He began remembering the various items in his wallet, trying to prepare himself for whatever might come next. There was the picture of Claire and the picture of Mom facing it. And then one of him in uniform, taken at camp. And a four leaf clover he and Claire had found together. Then there was his I.D. card which they'd already read to him, and . . . oh my God!

The letter from Claire, the last one she'd written.

His heart raced with this new discovery, and he heard it faintly beneath the rush of his thoughts.

So that's where they'd learned about the song! She'd mentioned it, mentioned it by name. That's where they'd got that bit of information, no question about it. Well, he'd be ready now. What else was in the wallet?

Frantically, he combed his memory for fragments, listening to his heart, aware of it as he would be aware of a traitor revealing his blackest, most secret thoughts.

He tried to calm himself, tried not to plan, tried not to reveal through his heart what he was thinking.

And when his heart had calmed again, he began to formulate a plan. They would undoubtedly parade the entire contents of his

wallet before his eyes. He would close his eyes, then, refuse to see. What if they forced him to open them? They couldn't. But what if they *did*. They couldn't, but he would be prepared anyway. He would know what to expect. What else was in the wallet?

A few credits? Yes, a five credit note. And three quarter-credit discs. Well, they couldn't make much of that. What else?

His driver's license, and a gyro-car ownership certificate. They would probably play that up big. Flash a picture of the car probably. Was the year and make on the certificate? Yes, yes, it was.

HE was beginning to feel quite proud of himself, almost giddy as he tried to outguess the enemy's next move.

The wallet itself. He mustn't forget that. It was engraved from his father. "To the only son a man could ever want."

That was important. They could make a big thing out of that "only son" angle.

He had almost forgotten the sound of his heart. It had become a natural occurrence. If he had been released that instant, he would have felt strange without the constant thumping around him.

He was trying to remember what else he'd carried in his wallet, trying to fully prepare himself

against any possible surprise assault when the music started again.

It was soft and slow, and it seemed to pulse into the chamber.

His heart leaped at the first sound of the melody, but he kept a rigid control on his emotions and listened coldly. They would flash the picture again, and watch his reactions. He grinned, mentally condemning them for their lack of imagination.

Then, beneath the thump of his heart, and beneath the swelling strains of the music he heard a faint hissing sound. He wrinkled his brow in consternation, completely bewildered until the odor seeped into his nostrils. It was the unmistakable odor of perfume, a light scent, the scent a young girl might wear. He breathed deeply of it, and waited expectantly.

Claire appeared again.

He heard his heart stop momentarily, then continue its beating, a little faster now. It wasn't the photograph this time.

She looked real. He could almost reach out and touch her. Her hair was blond, a blond that glistened and shimmered as in the rays of a strong sun. Her eyes were the deepest blue, and he saw the crinkles at the outer edges, saw them as clearly as if he'd been standing a foot away from her. Her skin was tanned, and she was smiling, her teeth even and

white.

She wore a light blue tunic zippered down the front, clinging to her tightly, revealing a youthful suppleness beneath the garment. A red belt held the tunic at her slender waist, and a deep blue skirt flared out from the waist, terminating just below her knees.

She wore stockings, and her legs were tanned and rounded beneath their sheerness. Blue, high-heeled pumps were on her feet.

He listened to the increased tempo of his heart, realizing they'd momentarily caught him off balance. Why, Claire never owned an outfit like that one! They'd dreamt it up, the whole damned shooting match. They'd figured the coloring of her hair and eyes from the black and white photograph. They couldn't go too far wrong with blond hair and light eyes. And the rest was sheer imagination. Then they'd projected it all before him in some three-dimensional manner, counting on the element of surprise to achieve the desired results. Well, they'd partly succeeded, but he was on to their little game now.

He was quite pleased when he heard his heart slow down to its normal tempo again.

And then she moved!

QUITE suddenly, so suddenly that he blinked his eyes in

disbelief. She was moving! First her arm, quite easily. She lifted it over her head and waved at him, and her eyes opened wide in recognition, and the smile expanded on her face.

She was holding out her arms now, reaching for him.

He remembered his resolve to resist their further tricks. Instantly, he snapped his eyes shut.

"Don't try that," the voice warned.

His heart leaped at the sound of the voice, and he was instantly angry with himself for having been so affected. He kept his eyes shut tightly.

"Open your eyes," the voice commanded.

"Go to hell," he shouted. "Take your picture away and I'll open my eyes."

There was no answer.

Tentatively, experimentally, he opened his eyes to see if Claire was gone. She was still there, reaching for him, a pleading, mute look on her face. He tried to maintain control, and he listened in panic to the racing of his heart again. He fought, realizing it was all illusion and yet succumbing to the near-reality of it, straining his arms forward, checked only by the chains above. He shook his head.

Instantly, he closed his eyes again.

And immediately, a terrifying

shock crackled through his body. It started at his wrists, where chains touched flesh, snapped down the length of his arms, stiffened his body in pain, reaching down to his toes.

"Open your eyes," the voice commanded, louder this time.

"No!" he bellowed in pain.

He tensed his muscles as the electricity pulsed through his frame again, tearing at his nerve ends, ripping apart the sane order of his mind. His heart was pumping blood recklessly, the sound reaching his numbed senses over the shock-rush that surged through his body.

"All right," he screamed, "all right, *all right*, *ALL RIGHT!*"

Weakly, he lifted his lids, sobs wracking his body. A wave of relief swept over him as the shock ceased abruptly.

"Don't try that again," the voice ordered. "Keep your eyes open and your head up. Do you understand?"

"Yes," he murmured weakly.

"*Do you understand?*"

"Yes," he shouted, "yes," hearing his heart thunder back at him. He sank back in exhaustion. "Yes, I understand."

"Good. Lift your head. Someone is waiting for you."

Slowly, jerkily, he raised his head and his eyes. The image of Claire was still there. She reach-

ed again, closer, her face clouding in disappointment when he did not respond.

The music seemed suddenly louder, and the perfume seemed to reach deeper into his nostrils, intoxicating his mind with the aroma.

More tricks, he thought, more tricks. Be careful.

Claire's eyes narrowed, and a knowing smile crossed her face, a smile he'd thought her incapable of. Slowly, with deliberate steadiness, her hand reached up to the zipper on her tunic.

With cool assurance, the smile still on her lips, she began to lower the zipper while he watched.

"No, Claire," he said.

The music accompanied the violent thumping of his heart, and the perfume deepened its aroma, a heavier odor now, muskier, more sensual.

Claire's face had grown hard, and he stared in disbelief as she began to gesture suggestively, unclothing herself all the while.

"Stop it!" he screamed. "Stop it!"

He closed his eyes. Instantly, the electric pain burned through his body, rushing powerfully from the chains at his wrists.

He opened his eyes again, saw thighs and gartered silk stockings rotating lewdly.

"Stop, stop, stop, stop!" he

shouted, closing his eyes tightly again.

There was only the maddening beat of his heart then, thundering loudly in the chamber. That and the stunning shock that pulsed through his body in ever more powerful waves until he lapsed into unconsciousness.

HE didn't know how long he'd been unconscious. He felt ill, and he retched drily, his body heaving in tortured convulsion.

Claire, the illusion that had been Claire, was gone. In her place, as deep as the jaws of Hell, was the complete, engulfing blackness.

In the blackness, almost like a living thing separate and apart from his own being, was the evenly spaced beating of his heart.

They left him alone.

He had time to think, and he thought of Claire, and of home, and of The War. He still thought of The War in simple terms, eliminating the abstract completely, basing his conclusions on his existing field of knowledge.

He could remember the day the Martians had launched the rocket. There had been no warning. The videos had suddenly blurted the news. An atomic rocket had been launched from the Moon, obliterating part of a small town in Arizona. The Government had thoroughly inspected the rocket,

determined its Martian origin, and immediately issued a declaration of War.

War. The concept was a strange one. The Government had patiently explained the concept in later bulletins. It was a state of conflict—*conflict, what was that?*—during which two opposing parties attempted to subdue the other. There was killing involved, and bloodshed. It was a barbarian concept, a relic of The Animal Age.

And what was The Animal Age? Here, Talbot had gone to the library and taken out scores of memory tapes, playing them over and over again. He could sum up the tapes in a single sentence: Atomic technology plus archaic ideology equals destruction. A simple equation.

Destruction was a negative quantity.

But men had learned. Add an equal positive quantity to a negative quantity and you eliminate the negative quantity. Man simply added reason, outlawing war, and eliminating destruction. The Animal Age was over. There had been no wars for the past three centuries.

Why then the War against Mars, he had asked himself? And he asked the same question again now, while his heart thudded in the darkness.

The Government had explained, of course. Earthmen were rational, well-adjusted people who had learned their lesson. Martians had not learned yet. Technologically, yes—but even as Earthmen had once sought only destruction, so did the Martians now. They had to be subjugated, taught.

It was several months after the alien attack that the Government made its more important announcement.

One thousand men would be called to active duty, trained and then sent to man two battleships which would stage a retaliation raid on Mars. These thousand men would be chosen from all walks of life, the rich and the poor, the young and the old.

Talbot was one of those chosen.

They trained together, one thousand men who would cross the void to wreak destruction on the upstart Martians. And the Martians, apparently intent on their own preparations now, sent no more missiles Earthward.

There were two great ships, *The Lancer's Flame* and *The Albatross*, twins in every aspect except the men who climbed aboard them. And then they had thundered away from Earth, their jets streaking across the blackness of space, gouging an acetylene path behind them that disintegrated into gray ashes drifting in the void.

And now, he thought bitterly, here I am. And this is War.

“ALL right, Talbot,” the voice said suddenly. The spotlight popped on again, blinding him momentarily. He heard his heart quicken its tempo.

“You won’t be able to sleep for a while, Talbot,” the voice said. He noticed again it was a different voice, unlike the previous two he’d heard, and he marvelled again at the perfect Terran it spoke.

“We drugged you while you were unconscious. A strong dosage of benzedrine. There’s been an adjustment in the current coming through the chains, too. No more unconsciousness, but we can promise you you’ll be uncomfortable if you close your eyes again.”

“I don’t care,” Talbot said stullenly. “Go ahead and have your fun. I don’t care.”

“We admire your attitude, Talbot,” the voice said drily.

“I’m happy for you.”

“We’re offering you an easy way out,” the voice said, “if the next few days prove too strenuous.”

“Yeah?”

“If you look down at the floor, you’ll discover a button several inches from your left foot.”

Talbot glanced down and saw the button set in the floor.

“A blaster is aimed at your head, automatically controlled by that

button. When you decide to step on it, death will be instant and painless.”

“Thanks,” Talbot said.

“You may step on it whenever you want to. It’s ready to operate now.”

“Well, that’s damned decent . . .”

The light snapped out, and Talbot’s own voice echoed back at him.

What now, he thought. What comes next?

Nothing came. Not for a long while. All he heard was the beating of his heart, dull, monotonous.

And then, along with the thud of his heart, there was another sound. It was soft at first, like the playful clicking of a child’s rattle. And then it increased in volume, became the steady staccato click of a woodpecker. It was joined now by other sounds, soft and muted at first, then pounding like the beat of his own heart, and then roaring into the chamber, thundering against his ear drums. The explosions increased in volume, and now they were accompanied by the blinding light that usually accompanies explosions. It was almost as if a thousand blasters had been turned loose at once, searing their way across the room, yanking at his eye sockets, bursting in blinding brilliance.

He closed his eyes and felt the terrifying shock rip through his

body. He opened his eyes to the explosive display before him. What was the use? What was the use? He couldn't close his ears, could he? He listened for his heart, could not distinguish it in the medley of ear-shattering sounds that filled the room. As powerful as the blows of a heavy club, the sounds buffeted him, draining all strength from his body.

He screamed over the sound of the explosions, closed his eyes against the streaks of fire that darted across the room.

Again, he was shocked, and he went stiff, immediately opening his eyes again. He must remember the shock. He mustn't close his eyes again. He must remember. He must, he must.

The chaos continued, it seemed, for hours on end.

And suddenly, the fire stopped erupting, the sounds ceased as at a signal. Silence seeped into every corner of the chamber, a silence that was almost as ear-shattering as the din had been.

A silence complete except for the thud of his heart.

IN the brief respite, his mind worked frantically. If they understood and spoke Terran so well, they had probably studied the planet. Why, certainly! How else would they have known the melody of *Spring Is Gay* by simply

reading the title in a letter?

But if they knew the culture of Earth so well that they could reproduce its popular music, why had they been so intent on studying his clothes? Logically, they would know all about the clothes, too. And following from this same assumption, they would certainly know as much about the men as they did about their music.

Why all this experimentation then?

Just what the hell were they trying to learn?

He had no time to do any more thinking. It started right then, and he thought it would never end. It was as if they'd saved everything for the big finale, and this was it.

Creatures began slithering out of the darkness.

They're coming out, he thought. These are Martians!

Creatures of every size and description. Green, slimy apparitions with scaled bodies and dripping fangs. Things with eyes all over their heads, and fluid tentacles. Creatures that rolled, secreting vile fluids that spread stickily at his feet. They seethed into the chamber, screaming and shouting in an alien tongue, brandishing outmoded weapons, daggers dripping blood, broad swords, ancient pistols from The Animal Age, machine guns of that era, hand grenades. They

crowded closer, closer, baring their teeth, twisting their assorted bodies out of shape, screaming all the while, milling around him, reaching for him.

They smelled of sweat, and vomit, and gunpowder and bile.

They leered and they attacked each other, and they dripped green fluids, and a fluid the color of blood except for its incredible thickness.

He waited in fear, his heart beating a wild tattoo, as they closed in on him, touching him with cold tentacles, scratching his nude body with their talons, winding their bodies about him.

Cautiously, he edged his foot toward the button in the floor.

Suddenly his mother was in the midst of the seething creatures. They tore at her clothes and he screamed and strained at his chains. They lifted her high and threw her across the room.

And then he saw Claire in the arms of a blue, scaled creature. She shrieked in terror and Talbot tore at the chains, forgetting the button now, filled only with a boiling rage. The creature ripped off Claire's clothes, pawed her, mauled her savagely.

Then, behind all this, behind the screams and the blood-cries, the explosions began again and the air was rife with strange smells. Globes of yellow shattered before

his eyes. He strained to see Claire, saw only a blood-smeared body being carried aloft now.

The chamber seemed to suddenly burst into flame, and the creatures danced in the flame, shouting gleefully, raising their weapons, pressing closer, closer, closer.

He watched, tempted to reach for the button again. He refused. He refused to die. And so he watched.

He watched them attack and mutilate his mother and Claire, saw his father burst into the chamber to be immediately overrun by the creatures, saw gyrocars appear and burst into flame, saw Terrans ripped apart.

ALL this he watched like a never-ending parade before his tortured eyes. And eventually, his eyes became accustomed to the blood orgy; the explosions were second nature.

He hung limply from the chains and watched. And as suddenly as they had come, they disappeared. His heart beat was the only thing left in the chamber.

"You didn't use the button," the voice said suddenly.

"No," he mumbled.

"You will."

"No," he insisted.

"We know. And we say you will."

"No."

"Listen."

He listened. A steady hiss reached his ears.

"More perfume?" he asked listlessly.

"No. Gas."

He heard his heart thunder back at him, as they said the word.

"Gas?"

"Yes."

"I don't care," he said. "I knew you would kill me."

"But you will hear yourself die," the voice said. "The gas does not take immediate effect. You will hear your heart slowing down; you will hear the beats become farther and farther apart. And then they will stop altogether. Before then, you will have stepped on the button."

He shook his head wearily.

"Yes," the voice insisted. "Yes, you will."

"Oh, go to hell," he said angrily.

He listened to the gas, and he listened to his heart.

Thump. Pause. *Thump.* Pause.

They were crazy. His heart was fine.

A yellowish cloud began to drift into the glare of the spotlight.

Thump. Pause. *Thump.* Pause.

The cloud became thicker, and he tried not to breathe it. But it surrounded him, and he could hold his breath no longer. He drew in deeply, smelled a sweetish aroma.

Thump.

He waited.

Thump.

He drew another deep breath, saw the yellow fog stream into his nostrils. *Thump*, his heart sounded.

Again, he waited. Where was it? Where was the next . . .

Thump.

Again, the fog swirled into his nostrils.

Thump.

He waited patiently. Surely his heart was beating. Surely that was his heart he felt pounding in his chest. If only he could reach down to touch it. If only he could move a hand to feel his pulse. But where was the beat? Why was . . .

Thump.

An eternity passed. I feel the same, he thought. I feel exactly the same. They're lying to me. But why isn't my heart beating? Maybe there's something wrong with the ampli . . .

Thump.

He listened avidly now, surrounded completely by the yellow gas that still hissed into the room. His ears strained for a sign of sound, any sound, a small sound. But that was his heart beating inside his chest! He couldn't be imagin . . .

Thump.

A flood of relief surged through him when he heard the thud. But how far apart they'd been. How far apart *can* they be before a person

dies? Doesn't a person need so much blood pumped into his body at such and such an interval? It seemed impossible that he could go so long between beats. That he wouldn't lose consciousness. Where was the next one? God, how much longer would it take? How long could he hold out? What kind of gas were they using? Why should they do this to him when he . . .

Thump.

They were right. He would kill himself. It was too much. How could a man be expected to listen to himself die? No one could ask that of a man. That's why they'd given him the button to step on. Perhaps they were humane after all. Or perhaps they were timid, cowardly? Perhaps they couldn't bear the thought of killing? But why launch an atomic missile then? Where was that goddamned heartbeat? Maybe they wouldn't kill him if he didn't kill himself? Maybe they were afraid to? Maybe they'd just wait until he frightened himself to death. But the gas. Surely the gas was slowing down the beat of his heart. Where was the beat?

He began to feel his knees tremble. I'm getting weaker, he thought. I'm beginning to di . . .

Thump.

He exhaled deeply, his breath issuing forth in a thankful sigh. There was still a little time left,

still a little time. I won't press the button. I'll wait. I'll wait.

He waited for what seemed like an eternity. His heart did not beat again. Maybe I'm dead, he thought.

Maybe this is death.

Just no heart beat, nothing. Just nothing. Maybe I'm dead. The thought began to excite him. Maybe I'm dead.

"Okay, Talbot," the voice said. "You win. Turn on the lights boys. Clear that junk out of the chamber."

THE sound of a powerful generator whined into existence, blasting the yellow cloud out of the room. He heard the rattle of chains, and was surprised to find his arms hanging at his sides. The room was brilliantly lit now, and as the fog cleared away he saw that it was a clean room, with windows covered with drawn plas-teel blinds, and not as large a room as he'd imagined.

A projection booth seemed to jut out of the far wall, and there were doors set at various places in the walls.

The floor was a mess, still bearing remainders of the ordeal he'd been through.

On the opposite wall, he could see the spotlight which had previously burned down into his eyes.

He moved his arms tentatively.

Numb, but otherwise all right. *What were they going to do next?*

He tensed automatically as one of the doors slid open noiselessly. A tall Earthman in uniform walked into the room. Talbot stared in disbelief. The Earthman unshackled his wrists and said, "Come along with me, boy."

Talbot swung viciously, his fist catching the tall man on the side of his jaw. "Get away from me, you lousy swine!" he shouted. "Keep your filthy paws . . ."

"Let's have a hand here," the tall man bellowed. Talbot swung at him again, and the tall man caught at his wrist and held it tightly.

"Easy, boy, it's all over," he said. "Easy."

They piled into the room, all tall, all dressed like Earthmen, and he fought them until he was exhausted. They carried him out then, their hands strangely gentle.

HE waited before the Colonel's desk, fully clothed now, suspicious. He was waiting for their next trick.

"You've done splendidly," the Colonel said.

"Go ahead and kill me," Talbot answered. "Get it over with."

"We're Earthmen," the Colonel said. "We're not going to harm you."

Talbot stared at the man scorn-

fully.

The Colonel rose, pressed a button in the wall. The plasteel blind rolled back, revealing a window. The Colonel pointed.

"Look out there, boy."

Talbot looked, his eyes widening. "The . . . the ship. . . the . . ."

"*The Lancer's Flame*," the Colonel said. "Intact, safe. You've nothing to worry about any more."

Talbot's face hardened again. "You're a filthy liar," he spat, even though he sensed truth in the Colonel's words.

"Talbot, for Heaven's sake, try to understand. This was all a test. It's over now."

"A what?"

"A test."

Talbot reached across the desk instinctively, his fist shoveling up a handful of the Colonel's collar. "Why you—" he shouted, believing the Colonel all at once, understanding that he was indeed an Earthman. "Are you crazy? Are you crazy to put a man through *that* for . . . for *fun*?"

He was screaming now, his voice a high anger.

The Colonel took his wrist gently, and lowered his hand. "Most of you came through," he said. "There have been no more than twenty casualties in five-hundred completed tests."

Talbot shook his head dazedly.

"You stupid . . . putting men through . . . you stupid . . . you crazy . . ."

"There are no Martians," the Colonel continued in a soft voice. "Some of you guessed immediately and those tests were invalid, of course."

Talbot was still shaking his head, the rage subsiding in him to be replaced by a righteous sense of indignation.

"Where are we?" he asked suddenly.

"On Mars," the Colonel replied. He was a big man with graying temples, and serious blue eyes.

"No Martians," Talbot murmured, indignation giving way to confusion.

"There is no life at all on Mars. We've held the planet as a base for many years."

Talbot suddenly wanted explanations. "The missile the Martians sent . . ." he started.

"We invented the incident. Cleared everyone out of the town and then destroyed it. The inhabitants are still under the strictest government supervision. There are no Martians. We're on Mars now. Do you see any Martians?"

A look of unbelievable contempt crossed Talbot's face. "No missile! Then . . . then," he paused, shaking his head in exasperation. "How could you do all this? Is the whole damn world nuts? Why

did you . . ."

"There's no danger from Mars boy," the Colonel said. "But there is another danger."

Talbot listened closely, trying to understand.

"Think of our society, Talbot. Not a war since The Animal Age. A people who have never known conflict. A satisfied, happy people. A vulnerable people.

"Or were they vulnerable? Could they be depended on if there were a *real* alien threat? Would they be willing to fight for their happiness." He paused. "We had to know, you see."

"And you picked a thousand goddamned fools to . . ."

"There may be trouble," the Colonel said in a grave voice. "We have had every indication of trouble from Venus."

"Venus?" Talbot asked in surprise.

"Yes. A technology comparable to our own, we figure. At least, the scouting ships we've seen showed every evidence of atomic power."

TALBOT'S eyes opened in amazement. "And just because you saw a few goddamned scouts, you put one thousand men . . ."

"There's been more than that, Talbot. There have been open attacks in more than three places. The Venusians aren't kidding.

"They'll be ready soon—but will we?"

Talbot considered this silently.

"That's what we had to find out. We chose one thousand men, young, old, rich, poor, every conceivable type we could find. Our test cases. We trumped up a Martian war, sent them off in battle ships, put them all to sleep as the ships approached Mars, and then subjected them to the most inhuman conditions possible.

"Everything that happened to you could happen to you in a state of war. Your loved ones violated, the blackness, the noise, the smells, the sexual craving, the rebellion, the physical pain, the sleeplessness. All of it. Only we magnified it enormously, focussed the torment, because we were testing a culture utterly unused to these things."

Talbot nodded unconsciously, remembering what he'd been through.

"Even the creatures that surrounded you are possible. We've never seen Venusian life."

Indignation gave way further to curiosity, as Talbot began to understand the purpose of the ordeal. "They touched me," he said. "The things touched me."

"Our own men," the Colonel said. "Disguise and suggestion are a powerful combination, especially when a person is bordering

on shock as you were."

"And the rest?"

"A combination of things. Recordings, three dimensional projections, flares." The Colonel paused. "I'm afraid we really poured it on."

Talbot nodded knowingly. He was beginning to feel all right about this, secretly proud.

"But my heart . . ." he started.

"Yes. Actually, we wanted to hear your reactions to the various stimuli. We had no other way of examining you without revealing ourselves."

Talbot shook his head impatiently. "I don't mean that. I mean at the end of the test, when my heart began to slow down, when the gas . . ."

"A harmless colored gas," the Colonel explained. "And that wasn't your heart you were listening to then. We'd turned off the amplifier as soon as the gas came into the chamber. That was a drum, Talbot. A drum being pounded before a microphone."

"What?"

"You see, we wanted to know how long you'd fight. We wanted to know whether you'd destroy yourself when faced with imminent destruction anyway. You didn't."

"And if I'd stepped on the button?"

"The test would have ended

right then. You would have been among those who failed. You realize, of course, that the blaster was completely fictitious. The lights would have gone on if you stepped on that button. That's all."

A sudden frown crossed Talbot's face. "How many did you say failed?" he asked.

The Colonel smiled pleasantly. "Twenty. Twenty out of five-hundred. We've come a long way since The Animal Age, Talbot. There are some who say we've taken the soft path to self-destruction. But peace has paid off. Almost every case we ran was a duplication of yours. And the results were practically identical.

"Peace has only strengthened Man's desire to hold this happi-

ness. We're ready now to hold off anything that threatens our security."

Talbot smiled weakly. He was suddenly very tired.

"When . . . when can we go home, sir?" he asked.

"As soon as all the tests are completed."

Talbot thought of Claire and he smiled. A new thought clouded his features. "The rest, sir. The remaining five-hundred. Do you think their tests will . . . I mean, will they be all right, too?"

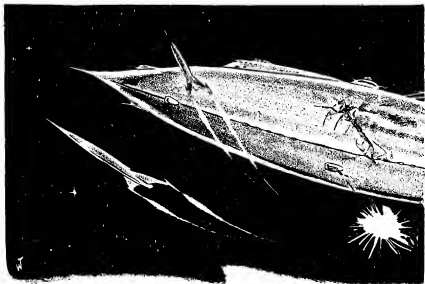
The Colonel nodded gently. "I'm sure they will, Talbot."

A wide grin split Talbot's features. "You know, sir," he said, "I'm hungry as hell."

THE END



"Capture her my eye — I'm going with her!"



General Taylor knew that Earth could not resist the invaders, so he ordered all units to surrender. But one commander thought he meant —

EARTHMEN ASK NO QUARTER!

By

Fox B. Holden

“LET them in, sergeant.” The white-haired New United Nations World Space Force chief spoke the words as though he had been forced into

the most humiliating surrender in history. And he had been.

What could he tell them? They were not fools, after all, and he was so impossibly exhausted . . .



Uniform was a mess. All day and all night, words, words, . . . and nothing. Too many useless, powerless words, all adding up to nothing. Foreign space admirals, ground-force field marshals, defense secretaries from a dozen capitals.

Where were the ion-field cannon that had been promised for the last twenty years? Where were the new main-drives? The new alloys? Promises, always promises—but where in God's name *were* they?

And now—now it didn't matter any more.

He let his massive frame slump tiredly for a moment, elbows flat-

tening some of the official litter strewn across the broad desk-top, head in his big hands.

"General Taylor, sir—"

He forced the thoughts from his brain with almost the same physical force with which he shoved his tired body erect.

"Yes, yes, thank you, sergeant. Good morning, gentlemen. Sorry to have kept you waiting."

There were perhaps thirty of them, all civilians, all crowding for a spot nearest the huge desk, all with stub pencils and sheafs of crumpled newsprint in their hands. A couple of flash-bulbs went off.

"General, can you tell us what the aliens' intentions are?"

And it had begun.

"I'm authorized to tell you that the alien space ship is hostile. But, under the circumstances we are convinced with reasonable certainty that their hostility may be . . . mollified to an appreciable degree."

He watched them as they got the official double-talk down word for word. And then, "In other words, General—we are counter-attacking?"

"Sorry. That information is classified."

"About how high is the alien, sir?"

He is circling Earth in an orbit about two thousand miles out, passing our own stations about once every forty-eight hours."

"How big is the ship, sir? About what shape?"

"It is a cigar-shaped vessel, approximately three miles in length and slightly under one at maximum diameter."

"Have any of our own ships as yet had actual contact with this craft?"

"Yes, there has been contact. I am sorry that for the time being the result cannot be disclosed."

"There are rumors, General, that the 402nd Space Wing sent a five or six-ship element of J-83 Lancers from Lunar Base, and that the ships have not reported back. Is this true, sir?"

"It is true that they have not been heard from since they left."

Then a young, unquavering voice cut in softly. "When is it to begin, sir? And when will we—"

"You may—write, gentlemen, that the invasion of Earth has already begun. And, that we have absolutely no defense against it. None. Because of that fact, the decision of the New U. N. Joint Chiefs has been that there should be no needless loss of life. You may write that we have—that we have already surrendered."

His face felt as though it were hewn from wood—a strange wood with a fever in it. He had spoken far beyond his authorization. But they had to know. They could not be lied to forever. And the lies had always, ultimately, been worthless things. He was so *tired*.

"General, can you tell us *why*?"

The group was white-faced, still. The flash-bulbs had stopped popping. The first impulse to bolt the General's office for the nearest bank of press telephones had somehow died even as it had arisen. Belief and disbelief mingled as one in the eyes of each.

"I'll try gentlemen," Taylor said wearily, leaning across the desk, his knuckles white against the smooth surface. "I could talk about our stressing of cultural advancement in this 21st century, rather than technological . . . a

trend that has always made us of the military fearful of the future—now at hand—but what's the use of rehashing problems of the past . . . Plainly and simply, gentlemen, the Invader is superior to us in every phase of known warfare. Add to that the element of a surprise attack and you find us as we are at this moment—beaten, irreparably."

No one said anything. There was nothing to say.

General Taylor sank into his chair and stared at them, a grim hopelessness in his eyes.

Then the newsmen walked from the room. Slowly and silently.

ROBERT Manning, civilian Pentagon clerk, told himself that the Invaders might better kill everybody off and get it over with than to just regiment the hell out of everything. A man couldn't even stay home so his wife could take care of his cold for him.

He sneezed. If allowed to live it, there were perhaps forty years of life yet for him. Forty years, and they would be slave years. It was all too damned new and just hadn't got through to him yet. What in God's name was it going to be *like* . . .

There was a sickness in his stomach, and he knew it was not from his cold.

"Manning—"

He looked up. It was Sweeney, the chief clerk. Manning always thought of him as a man who should've been a first-sergeant somewhere. He was big enough and loud enough, and certainly had temper enough.

"Yes, Mr. Sweeney?"

"Need these damn records right away. They all here? Each reel double-wound with positive and negative both?"

"Yes, sir." Sweeney picked up the bundlesome stack of microfilm reels. "Mr. Sweeney—"

"What is it?"

"Are—are *They* going to get 'em? All of Earth's Space outpost and military records—*everything*?"

"After the Joint Chiefs make out emergency recall orders for every last damn unit, they are. They will check each set of orders against every unit record here, all the way from Corps down to each individual ship." Sweeney grunted. "Then they'll burn 'em, positives, negatives, everything . . . then when the ships come in, they will destroy them too."

Manning felt something turn over inside him. "General Taylor, —"

"What the hell can Taylor do? Christ, you're better off than he is. Once every ship is back here and busted up, he won't even have a job. Maybe not even a head."

"Every ship. They're all there,

Mr. Sweeney. Positives and negatives double-wound on every reel."

"They better be. Or *you* won't have a damn head!"

Sweeney turned and steamrolled out of the office, with every existing record past and present of General Taylor's New U. N. World Space Force under one beefy arm. For security reasons, Manning realized, there had been made but a single copy and negative for each of its units.

His desk was an old one, practically an antique dating back to the 1940's, and his sonotyper was buried deep in its insides on a wooden shelf that folded out to meet you in an awkward manner when you pushed the desk-top up, over and down.

Manning pushed, and with a couple of bronchial grunts produced the sonotyper. He fed in a continuous paper spool, turned on the current, unhooked the compact microphone from the machine's side, and began dictating the rest of his day's work.

Something got kicked viciously out of the key-bed. Black, shiny squares of something. All he needed was for the sonotyper to go haywire and start shooting its complex insides all over.

He stopped dictating to remove his glasses and dry his streaming eyes. His vision cleared, and for an instant settled on the shiny

things that had landed near the front edge of his desk.

Hunks of microfilm.

He picked them up, held one to the light. Words. He fished in a drawer, found a magnifying glass that was used for half-obliterated old files.

He could see the words better, but they were backwards. He had the negative. Impatiently, he grabbed the other square. And read it.

And shivered. And again, it wasn't his cold that was bothering him. He would have to call Sweeney right away—

... Light Space Brigade, Experimental. Temporary outpost, Callisto. Force: 20 Lancer-type J-88 destroyers. Complement: 600. Commanding: Col. Geoffrey Steele—

He felt his insides turning to cold jelly. He would have to call Sweeney. God! Sweeney would skin him alive. Somehow, the tail ends of one of the double-wound reels must have stuck out a little, got sliced neatly off when he'd hastily jammed its pan-cover back on after inspecting it. Then the severed squares of microfilm had slipped down, unnoticed, through one of the desktop cracks where the sonotyper fold-away unit was. And landed in the key-bed. Only Sweeney wouldn't understand it that way. And the Joint Chiefs—

Oh God no!

He had to think.

And he thought of that other name. On the microfilm record—Steele, it was, who commanded 600 men, twenty J-88s . . .

He thought of forty years of slavery.

And then he was doing a crazy thing—crazy—

While no one looked, Robert Manning sneezed and blew his nose and touched the flame of his cigarette lighter to the two squares of microfilm.

THE white-faced communications sergeant stood just inside the door, and this time he failed to be impressed with the unusual smartness of the Colonel's acknowledging salute. The thick sheaf of yellow papers he held in his left hand was trembling visibly, noisily, and he couldn't make it stop.

"Well, Grady, what is it? You look as though you'd picked up a telepath message from one of our Callistan cap-crawlers, or something—" He reached out for the quaking message the sergeant held, and the communications man smiled nervously and held it out to him.

"Sorry, sir. I—I guess I just—"

"No trouble, boy?" The stocky black-and-silver uniformed figure paused in its movement, the thick

pile of yellow papers momentarily forgotten. All of Steele's personnel seemed like sons to him. Even the raw recruits who had previously never been further out than Earth's own Moon. Sometimes, during the lonely hours there had been in the fastnesses of Space, he had surmised it was because there had never been a real son of his own with whom to share the adventures of his calling.

But hadn't it been Space itself that had denied him those many things other men could take for granted—the things for which he had never quite been able to trade? Forty years of it. Venus to Pluto. Deep Space at the System's rim and beyond, to the very edge of Infinity itself.

Sometimes this deep hurt within him seemed too great. And yet, somehow, it seemed always worth the venture. One day, no matter the cost or the hurt, men's outposts would be flung to the stars themselves. This thing he knew.

The sergeant was speaking, and there was a fear in his eyes.

"Something's—happened, home, sir. You'd better read this right away. All the way to the very end, sir."

Steele ran a freckled, stub-fingered hand slowly and deliberately along the close-cropped iron-gray side of his squarish skull.

Attention all stations, the message read. URGENT IMPERATIVE. Earth has been successfully invaded. The rapidity, timing, and infallibility of the attack has made the necessity of immediate capitulation unquestionable. The following-listed units are therefore commanded, for the good of the planet, to return to home Earth bases at once, with all armament either completely dismantled or destroyed. The conquerors have warned that failure to comply with this command will result in wholesale liquidation of Earth's populace.

The long list of outposts followed for fifteen closely-spaced pages. The message was signed Taylor, General, New United Nations World Space Force, Commanding.

Steele suddenly felt himself struggling to keep order for full-scale attack bottled in his throat.

Then he fought to keep from simply cursing.

He fought to keep the hot, quick panic in him from boiling into some unthinkable suicide.

The sergeant still stood before him, the thing of awful fear deep in his eyes.

"Get Major Zukow at once, sergeant."

"Yes, sir. But sir—"

"What is it?" His jaws hurt, and he could feel the words hissing

from between his teeth.

"The list, sir. We're the smallest and newest unit there is, so we'd be right at the bottom, page fifteen. But we're not there. We're not listed at all, sir."

He looked. Grady was right. And OK'd and signed by Taylor himself, no mistaking that.

"Get Major Zukow, sergeant. On the double!"

"Yes, sir!" The communications non-com stumbled awkwardly; acclimatization to lesser gravities came quickly only with long experience. He recovered, and then in a curious loping fashion began to run.

FOR terse seconds Steele spoke clipped words into a unit-communicator. And then he waited for Zukow.

It would be a moment or so yet. He looked at the message again, re-read it, tried to glean information from it that it didn't contain. It told what, but it didn't tell *why*. Nor even how. It was just a command, to be obeyed like any other command. No, it wasn't the soldier's place to question. Never the soldier's place to question.

Here is an ideal, they would say. Here is the thing you must work or fight for. Here is what is worth believing in. And the soldier believed. If he did not he

was fortunate, for then he just had a job to do. But if he believed, he was the most hapless creature in the Universe. For sooner or later, the ideal wore thin as a facade for the more practical expediencies which moved behind it. What true ideal there was with the soldier, yet, his was not the freedom to serve it . . . And when the ideal was suddenly scrapped; when they said now, now it is all over, now this is what you must do—here is a new thing to believe . . .

Forty years, from the bogs of Venus to the wastes of Pluto . . .

He looked again at the list headed *ALL UNITS*: and checked them, one by one.

Grady had been right. Experimental simply wasn't there. Maybe an experimental Light Space Brigade on a dark little world like Callisto could get lost in the shuffle.

But he knew better. With Earth at stake, Taylor would allow no such error. Taylor knew every one of his units by heart, he must . . .

He thought about Taylor. He thought about him the way he had known him as both soldier and individual, as general and as a man. Character. Principle. Guts. The three biggest things about Taylor. A man who followed orders to the letter—a man who would sur-

render of his own volition, no matter what price to pay the piper . . . that was where the principle came in; the character, the guts.

He looked at Taylor's facsimile-signature again. Signed by force? By threat? Obviously. The message itself said as much. But if somehow there'd been a mistake, a record overlooked, Taylor would know, and would—

But who else would know? At a glance, who else would know? And then how much would Taylor dare?

For one of the rare times in his life, Steele was frightened to his core.

"Colonel Steele, sir!" Major Zukow snapped a perfunctory salute, put himself at rest and lowered his towering square-cut body into a laxer chair. The healthy pink in his broad face and the purposefulness in the set of his clean-cut features made him look younger than he was, and the close-cropped black hair was like an added insignia of his profession to his perfectly-fitted uniform.

"You'd better take a look at this, Georgi. And then we've got to get things moving." Steele handed the order across his desk.

He waited while Zukow read. He watched Zukow's face. It seemed to gradually coagulate.

And when he was finished, Steele said, "Now find us on there!"

"But I don't—anything else, any other details? Is this—?"

"It's as true as the leaves on your shoulders, Major. And that's all there is, so far. Grady will be in with anything else when and if it should come. Well? What are you thinking?"

"Thinking? If this damned thing isn't some criminal joke, there's no thinking to it, Colonel. We just *go*, period. I'll get—"

"Just a minute. Did you try to find us on there? What do you make of that?"

"A mistake. Some clerical mistake, that's all. What else could be made of it? On an order like this?"

Steele shifted in his swivel-seat, and a neglected spring squawked its protest. "Suppose," he began slowly, "it was a mistake, Major. But Taylor put his name to it anyway, just the way it is. Now, do you think he'd be *likely* to miss such an error?"

ZUKOW hesitated, a scowl corrugating his wide forehead. "No I don't think so, but whether he was likely to or not hasn't anything to do with it. The mistake was made—he didn't catch it, but he signed it, sent it, and it means us like all the rest of 'em, period!"

"I think he caught it, Major."

"What do you—"

"I mean just that. He caught

it. *And still signed it!*"

"Colonel, don't be crazy! With a gun in his back—"

"Just the point. The people holding the gun would of course have grabbed the records as a check against Taylor's written command. It's the only way they'd have of knowing what was what. They'd do all they could to make sure they were given the complete works, of course, but ultimately, they'd have to trust Taylor—trust his fear of their terrible power and staggering advantage. Only—let's say there *was* a mistake. One way for it to be caught. Taylor—he'd know at a glance—the one man who would. And he still signed it!"

"Nuts, Colonel, nuts! What you are suggesting is absolute nonsense. With the lives of billions of people in the balance, you mean he'd—"

"Leave it up to us."

"With only twenty J-88s? With a planetful of people in the balance. Sir, do you think Taylor's a lunatic or something?"

Steele groped for an answer that would take the cold logic out of Zukow's questions. The exec had to be wrong. There must be an answer.

"Zukow," he heard himself saying at last, "there were only three of our craft out today—all behind the Big Boy, and I've ordered

then in—damped, and clammed up. I've grounded the rest. And if we don't get anything from communications within the next couple of hours, like a Notification of Error and Correction—"

"You must be out of your head, Colonel." Zukow stood up, towered over the big desk. Veins in his wide forehead stood out redly, accentuating the growing color in his stiffened face. "In a couple of hours we go into eclipse! Not for long, but while we are, we won't be *able* to pick up anything. Suppose *then* the notification comes? While we're working out some crazy plan still thinking Taylor was trying to pull a cute one? Do you think we can take a gamble like that? Do you think we have the *right* to take a gamble like that?"

"As it is," Steele replied slowly, "our people are to be slaves. For all we know, forever."

"A little dramatic, aren't you?"

"Would you call it a situation to be taken lightly?"

The other straightened, said nothing.

"Major, Taylor was taking a shot in the dark. 'We're a fantastically slim hope—but we're the *only* one he's got!'"

"And I think that right now you are a greater enemy to Earth than all her Invaders!"

"'Liberty or death,'" Major,

that's what Taylor was saying to us when he knowingly put his signature to a fluke error!"

"Oh for God's sake Colonel, come off it! It sounds just jimdandy but you haven't even got a plan! Infinity to zero, those are your odds! And if I thought you were seriously considering *not* going in, I'd—"

"Yes, Major, you'd what?"

The door opened. It was Grady. There was a communication folder in his hand.

Silently, Steele took the folder. There was an expectant look on Zukow's flushed face as his superior read the brief message. Then Steele looked up.

"No," he said. "It's not a Notification of Error and Correction. Simply a follow-up directive ordering all recalled craft to navigate the final ten thousand miles of their Earth-approaches in intervals of not less than twenty minutes each. Seems the Invaders have their entire headquarters and supply set-up in a mother-ship circling Earth—and they aren't taking any chances."

"Under these conditions, then —"

"As far as we are concerned, Major, the conditions are the same!"

For a moment Zukow stood immobile, his dark eyes snapping down to lock with Steele's. But

the colonel's did not flinch. And then the Major pivoted, and left Steele suddenly alone in the small office.

HE had hardly completed the all-units bulletin when the call-buzzer from Operations sounded. Within the next hour his six hundred men, his twenty small J-88 Lancers would be loaded to the fins with all the arms they could carry, and then . . .

Fleetingly, the thought nagged at him. Was Zukow a coward—or right? Twenty tiny J-88s balanced against the lives of four billion people . . . Yet there would be surprise, and the over-confidence of a powerful victor after an easy conquest. And more, there would be the will of a small band of men.

He flipped up the buzzer-switch, and the Operations lieutenant appeared on his small desk viewer.

"Yes, lieutenant? Did your group have some difficulty in understanding my bulletin?"

"No, sir. We're getting things Space-shape at our end right now. But, sir—you said that twenty craft were to be prepared."

"Yes that's correct. All of them."

"But there will be only nineteen, sir. Major Zukow blasted off nearly a half-hour before your announcement, in a completely unarmed J-88 and—he said—on your

authorization."

For a moment Steele said nothing. His mind seethed, yet he understood.

"Very well, lieutenant. You will stand by for a second bulletin."

The young officer's face faded from the screen, and Steele tried to think. Obvious, of course, but he wondered how much Zukow could be blamed. A frightened man. A coward, perhaps, doing what he thought was right.

But it was *not* right!

And they must now act swiftly. For if the enemy were warned in sufficient time . . .

Infinity to zero, Zukow had said, were his odds. Perhaps.

But there would be nineteen J-88s, armed to the fins . . .

THEY had kept Zukow waiting three hours after he landed. He had immediately been placed under guard upon setting the unarmed Lancer down at National Spaceport, and they had not believed him until his shouts of protest had been overheard by one of their officers. It had almost been for nothing—

But now they were taking him to the Pentagon; into Taylor's own suite of offices.

And Taylor was there. A different-looking Taylor than Zukow remembered—no longer the bulky, solid-looking figure. Wan, drawn,

as were those few of his staff working with him under the orders of the alien commander.

It was the alien who spoke. Taylor sat white and silent.

"My officers inform me that you have attempted to convince them of an impossible story, Earthman," he said. He was man-like, only taller. His head was bald and like a fleshless skull, and there was the glitter of a strong intelligence behind the widely-spaced double-lidded red eyes.

And Zukow repeated his story. Shamefully, fearfully, he told it. And as he did, new color flushed Taylor's lined face, then subsided to the whiteness of helpless anger.

"Your story will be checked carefully," the alien commander said in a slurred, yet fluent English. "If it is true—"

And that was all he said. There was a sudden flurry of movement, and General Taylor had wrested a weapon from the alien's belt. He squeezed its trigger in quick, desperate spasms, squeezed, squeezed . . .

Zukow lay headless on the floor. Zukow—the alien commander, and his guards.

"Hide them! We've got to hide them!" Taylor was yelling at his paralyzed aides. "If Steele can pull it off—can wreck that hellish mother-ship of theirs, they'll be

cut off down here—done for! Come on for God's sake help me!"

They sprang into action then.

And with the weapons from the slain aliens, waited silently behind the bolted office door.

Taylor's wasted frame was tensed. Minutes . . . hours . . . or death in seconds, perhaps. They could only wait.

THEY came out of the Sun.

Nineteen flat, finned, streamlined shapes, orange flame gouting from them as from the lips of Hell itself, hurtling headlong with some terrible vengeance glowing in their overheated tubes.

Then Space was suddenly gaping holes of searing color, bursting soundlessly as the nineteen became seventeen, fourteen, twelve.

The twelve became ten, and it was as though the bowels of the Sun itself had erupted to the right and to the left of them, and everywhere before and behind them.

Eight of them completed the first pass, and already there were yawning holes in the gleaming hide of their enemy.

They turned, came on again. Their torpedo-tubes sparkled, and five full salvos struck. The alien mother-ship spilled white flame from a gaping rupture in her flank, and three ships were left to close a second time.

Then two flat, finned, stream-

lined shapes did not pull from their pass. They hurtled, instead, headlong into the wounded juggernaut's very heart.

Drunkenly, and with almost deliberate slowness, it split in two, a slain thing, spewing its broken structure and shattered creatures with crazy abandon toward the great blue seas of Earth beneath.

One now there was, its flagship insigne half-scorched from its twisted, battered hull. Yet it hurtled through the blackness of Space toward the planet below it, the flush of victory shimmering in its overheated tubes.

THERE was little to be said. General Taylor stood at the side of the white hospital bed, and

Colonel Geofferey Steele, his head swathed in bandages, looked questioningly up at him.

"General, did Major Zukow—"

Taylor's mouth was grim. "He reached us—and the aliens. But we . . . managed to take care of the situation . . . to give you time." The General's features softened. "You and your crew—a magnificent job. Earth is proud—"

"We were lucky, sir," Steele attempted a grin. "Tried hard not to make any mistakes . . ."

Taylor smiled then, his laughter an emotional release they had both been seeking. "I—occasionally overlook mistakes!" he said.

And then the two men laughed together. For a long time.

The End

★ *Invented — Too Late!* ★

THE experimental monorail train of Baron Axel-Wennergren, which is being so highly touted, is one of those inventions, rare though they are, which come a half-century too late! The high-speed monorail train, had it appeared at the beginning of the century, would have served a very useful purpose.

The lines of modern transportation however are already well-defined. For high speed travel, the airplane, and the helicopter—shortly the rocket—also—will serve pas-

sengers. For heavy freight, the ordinary train and truck are the standard vehicles.

The two-hundred mile an hour monorail train, while a pretty conception, would require such a huge investment in material and resources, that it is impossible to consider seriously. By today's technology it offers certain advantages, but by tomorrow's—so clearly seen—it is simply an extravagant conceit. The monorail train—an invention which came too late!

★ Binary Eclipse ★

THE imaginary inhabitants of the planetary system of Algol, some eight hundred light-years distant, would enjoy one of the universe's most spectacular sights. Their sky would contain not one, but two suns, both incredibly huge—five and three million miles in diameter. But even this is not the amazing thing. The fact is that the two stars revolve around a common point. They eclipse each other!

There are hundreds of such stellar systems. Astronomers have

discovered them through noting the periodic waxing and waning of light intensities as the stars eclipse each other relatively. Astronomers particularly like to study such systems because through their interactions, it is easy to calculate their sizes, masses, orbits and other data. This gives a yardstick for other astronomical measurement. If men ever visit such stellar companions, they will see a close-up of the greatest show in the universe!

* * *



"Just be sure it's housebroken before you take it aboard ship!"



What were the little people? Tommy didn't know, but he was sure they'd make nice pets. So he stole them — and threw a monkey-wrench into —

Project: EARTH

By

Philip K. Dick

THE sound echoed hollowly through the big frame house.

It vibrated among the dishes in the kitchen, the gutters along the roof, thumping slowly and evenly like distant thunder. From time to time it ceased, but then it began again, booming through the quiet night, a relentless sound,

brutal in its regularity. From the top floor of the big house.

In the bathroom the three children huddled around the chair, nervous and hushed, pushing against each other with curiosity.

"You sure he can't see us?" Tommy rasped.

"How could he see us? Just



don't make any noise." Dave Grant shifted on the chair, his face to the wall. "Don't talk so loud." He went on looking, ignoring them both.

"Let me see," Joan whispered, nudging her brother with a sharp elbow. "Get out of the way."

"Shut up." Dave pushed her back. "I can see better now. He turned up the light."

"I want to see," Tommy said. He pushed Dave off the chair onto the bathroom floor. "Come on."

Dave withdrew sullenly. "It's our house."

Tommy stepped cautiously up onto the chair. He put his eye to the crack, his face against the wall. For a time he saw nothing. The crack was narrow and the light on the other side was bad. Then, gradually, he began to make out shapes, forms beyond the wall.

Edward Billings was sitting at an immense old-fashioned desk. He had stopped typing and was resting his eyes. From his vest pocket he had taken a round pocket watch. Slowly, carefully, he wound the great watch. Without his glasses his lean, withered face seemed naked and bleak, the features of some elderly bird. Then he put his glasses on again and drew his chair closer to the desk.

He began to type, working with expert fingers the towering mass of metal and parts that reared up before him. Again the ominous

booming echoed through the house, resuming its insistent beat.

Mr. Billings' room was dark and littered. Books and papers lay everywhere, in piles and stacks, on the desk, on the table, in heaps on the floor. The walls were covered with charts, anatomy charts, maps, astronomy charts, signs of the zodiac. By the window rows of dust-covered chemical bottles and packages lay stacked. A stuffed bird stood on top of the bookcase, gray and drooping. On the desk was a huge magnifying glass, Greek and Hebrew dictionaries, a postage stamp box, a bone letter opener. Against the door a curling strip of flypaper moved with the air currents rising from the gas heater.

The remains of a magic lantern lay against one wall. A black satchel with clothes piled on it. Shirts and socks and a long frock coat, faded and thread-bare. Heaps of newspapers and magazines, tied with brown cord. A great black umbrella against the table, a pool of sticky water around its metal point. A glass frame of dried butterflies, pressed into yellowing cotton.

And at the desk the huge old man hunched over his ancient typewriter and heaps of notes and papers.

"Gosh," Tommy said.

Edward Billings was working on his report. The report was open

on the desk beside him, an immense book, leather-bound, bulging at its cracked seams. He was transferring material into it from his heaps of notes.

THE steady thumping of the great typewriter made the things in the bathroom rattle and shake, the light fixture, the bottles and tubes in the medicine cabinet. Even the floor under the children's feet.

"He's some kind of Communist agent," Joan said. "He's drawing maps of the city so he can set off bombs when Moscow gives the word."

"The heck he is," Dave said angrily.

"Don't you see all the maps and pencils and papers? Why else would—"

"Be quiet," Dave snapped. "He will hear us. He is not a spy. He's too old to be a spy."

"What is he, then?"

"I don't know. But he isn't a spy. You're sure dumb. Anyhow, spies have beards."

"Maybe he's a criminal," Joan said.

"I talked to him once," Dave said. "He was coming downstairs. He spoke to me and gave me some candy out of a bag."

"What kind of candy was it?"

"I don't know. Hard candy. It wasn't any good."

"What's he do?" Tommy asked, turning from the crack.

"Sits in his room all day. Typing."

"Doesn't he work?"

Dave sneered. "That's what he does. He writes on his report. He's an official with a company."

"What company?"

"I forget."

"Doesn't he ever go out?"

"He goes out on the roof."

"On the roof?"

"He has a porch he goes out on. We fixed it. It's part of the apartment. He's got a garden. He comes downstairs and gets dirt from the backyard."

"Shhhh!" Tommy warned. "He turned around."

Edward Billings had got to his feet. He was covering the typewriter with a black cloth, pushing it back and gathering up the pencils and erasers. He opened the desk drawer and dropped the pencils into it.

"He's through," Tommy said. "He's finished working."

The old man removed his glasses and put them away in a case. He dabbed at his forehead wearily, loosening his collar and necktie. His neck was long and the cords stood out from yellow, wrinkled skin. His adams apple bobbed up and down as he sipped some water from a glass.

His eyes were blue and faded,

almost without color. For a moment he gazed directly at Tommy, his hawk-like face blank. Then abruptly he left the room, going through a door.

"He's going to bed," Tommy said.

Mr. Billings returned, a towel over his arm. At the desk he stopped and laid the towel over the back of the chair. He lifted the massive report book and carried it from the desk over to the bookcase, holding it tightly with both hands. It was heavy. He laid it down and left the room again.

The report was very close. Tommy could make out the gold letters stamped into the cracked leather binding. He gazed at the letters a long time—until Joan finally pushed him away from the crack, shoving him impatiently off the chair.

Tommy stepped down and moved away, awed and fascinated by what he had seen. The great report book, the huge volume of material on which the old man worked, day after day. In the flickering light from the lamp on the desk he had easily been able to make out the gold-stamped words on the ragged leather binding.

PROJECT B: EARTH

"Let's go," Dave said. "He'll come in here in a couple minutes. He might catch us watching."

"You're afraid of him," Joan taunted.

"So are you. So is Mom. So is everybody." He glanced at Tommy. "You afraid of him?"

Tommy shook his head. "I'd sure like to know what's in that book," he murmured. "I'd sure like to know what that old man is doing."

THE late afternoon sunlight shone down bright and cold.

Edward Billings came slowly down the back steps, an empty pail in one hand, rolled-up newspapers under his arm. He paused a moment, shielding his eyes and gazing around him. Then he disappeared into the back yard, pushing through the thick wet grass.

Tommy stepped out from behind the garage. He raced silently up the steps two at a time. He entered the building, hurrying down the dark corridor.

A moment later he stood before the door of Edward Billings' apartment, his chest rising and falling, listening intently.

There was no sound.

Tommy tried the knob. It turned easily. He pushed. The door swung open and a musty cloud of warm air drifted past him out into the corridor.

He had little time. The old man would be coming back with his pail of dirt from the yard.

Tommy entered the room and crossed to the bookcase, his heart

pounding excitedly. The huge report book lay among heaps of notes and bundles of clippings. He pushed the papers away, sliding them from the book. He opened it quickly, at random, the thick pages crackling and bending.

Denmark

Figures and facts. Endless facts, pages and columns, row after row. The lines of type danced before his eyes. He could make little out of them. He turned to another section.

New York

Facts about New York. He struggled to understand the column heads. The number of people. What they did. How they lived. What they earned. How they spent their time. Their beliefs. Religion. Politics. Philosophy. Morals. Their age. Health. Intelligence. Graphs and statistics, averages and evaluations.

Evaluations. Appraisals. He shook his head and turned to another section.

California

Population. Wealth. Activity of the state government. Ports and harbors. Facts, facts, facts—

Facts on everything. Everywhere. He thumbed through the report. On every part of the world. Every city, every state, every country. Any and all possible information.

Tommy closed the report uneas-

ily. He wandered restlessly around the room, examining the heaps of notes and papers, the bundles of clippings and charts. The old man, typing day after day. Gathering facts, facts about the whole world. The earth. A report on the earth, the earth and everything on it. All the people. Everything they did and thought, their actions, deeds, achievements, beliefs, prejudices. A great report of all the information in the whole world.

Tommy picked up the big magnifying glass from the desk. He examined the surface of the desk with it, studying the wood. After a moment he put down the glass and picked up the bone letter knife. He put down the letter knife and examined the broken magic lantern in the corner. The frame of dead butterflies. The drooping stuffed bird. The bottles of chemicals.

He left the room, going out onto the roof porch. The late afternoon sunlight flickered fitfully; the sun was going down. In the center of the porch was a wooden frame, dirt and grass heaped around it. Along the rail were big earthen jars, sacks of fertilizer, damp packages of seeds. An overturned spray gun. A dirty trowel. Strips of carpet and a rickety chair. A sprinkling can.

OVER the wood frame was a wire netting. Tommy bent

down, peering through the netting. He saw plants, small plants in rows. Some moss, growing on the ground. Tangled plants, tiny and very intricate.

At one place some dried grass was heaped up in a pile. Like some sort of cocoon.

Bugs? Insects of some sort? Animals?

He took a straw and poked it through the netting at the dried grass. The grass stirred. Something was in it. There were other cocoons, several of them, here and there among the plants.

Suddenly something scuttled out of one of the cocoons, racing across the grass. It squeaked in fright. A second followed it. Pink, running quickly. A small herd of shrilling pink things, two inches high, running and dashing among the plants.

Tommy leaned closer, squinting excitedly through the netting, trying to see what they were. Hairless. Some kind of hairless animals. But tiny, tiny as grasshoppers. Baby things? His pulse raced wildly. Baby things or maybe—

A sound. He turned quickly, rigid.

Edward Billings stood at the door, gasping for breath. He set down the pail of dirt, sighing and feeling for his handkerchief in the pocket of his dark blue coat. He

mopped his forehead silently, gazing at the boy standing by the frame.

"Who are you, young man?" Billings said, after a moment. "I don't remember seeing you before."

Tommy shook his head. "No."

"What are you doing here?"

"Nothing."

"Would you like to carry this pail out onto the porch for me? It's heavier than I realized."

Tommy stood for a moment. Then he came over and picked up the pail. He carried it out onto the roof porch and put it down by the wood frame.

"Thank you," Billings said. "I appreciate that." His keen, faded-blue eyes flickered as he studied the boy, his gaunt face shrewd, yet not unkind. "You look pretty strong, to me. How old are you? About eleven?"

Tommy nodded. He moved back toward the railing. Below, two or three stories down, was the street. Mr. Murphy was walking along, coming home from the office. Some kids were playing at the corner. A young woman across the street was watering her lawn, a blue sweater around her slim shoulders. He was fairly safe. If the old man tried to do anything—

"Why did you come here?" Billings asked.

Tommy said nothing. They stood looking at each other, the

stooped old man, immense in his dark old-fashioned suit, the young boy in a red sweater and jeans, a beanie cap on his head, tennis shoes and freckles. Presently Tommy glanced toward the wood frame covered with netting, then up at Billings.

"That? You wanted to see that?"

"What's in there? What are they?"

"They?"

"The things. Bugs? I never saw anything like them. What are they?"

Billings walked slowly over. He bent down and unfastened the corner of the netting. "I'll show you what they are. If you're interested." He twisted the netting loose and pulled it back.

Tommy came over, his eyes wide.

"Well?" Billings said presently. "You can see what they are."

Tommy whistled softly. "I thought maybe they were." He straightened up slowly, his face pale. "I thought maybe—but I wasn't sure. Little tiny men!"

"**N**OT exactly," Mr. Billings said. He sat down heavily in the rickety chair. From his coat he took a pipe and a worn tobacco pouch. He filled the pipe slowly, shaking tobacco into it. "Not exactly men."

Tommy continued to gaze down

into the frame. The cocoons were tiny huts, put together by the little men. Some of them had come out in the open now. They gazed up at him, standing together. Tiny pink creatures, two inches high. Naked. That was why they were pink.

"Look closer," Billings murmured. "Look at their heads. What do you see?"

"They're so small—"

"Go get the glass from the desk. The big magnifying glass." He watched Tommy hurry into the study and come out quickly with the glass. "Now tell me what you see."

Tommy examined the figures through the glass. They seemed to be men, all right. Arms, legs—some were women. Their heads. He squinted.

And then recoiled.

"What's the matter?" Billings grunted.

"They're — they're queer."

"Queer?" Billings smiled. "Well, it all depends on what you're used to. They're different — from you. But they're not queer. There's nothing wrong with them. At least, I hope there's nothing wrong." His smile faded, and he sat sucking on his pipe, deep in silent thought.

"Did you make them?" Tommy asked.

"No." Billings removed his pipe.

"No, not I."

"Where did you get them?"

"They were lent to me. A trial group. In fact, *the* trial group. They're new. Very new."

"You want — you want to sell one of them?"

Billings laughed. "No, I don't. Sorry. I have to keep them."

Tommy nodded, resuming his study. Through the glass he could see their heads clearly. They were not quite men. From the front of each forehead antennae sprouted, tiny wire-like projections ending in knobs. Like the vanes of insects he had seen. They were not men, but they were similar to men. Except for the antennae they seemed normal—the antennae and their extreme minuteness.

"Did they come from another planet?" Tommy asked. "From Mars? Venus?"

"No."

"Where, then?"

"That's a hard question to answer. The question has no meaning, not in connection with them."

"What's the report for?"

"The report?"

"In there. The big book with all the facts. The thing you're doing."

"I've been working on that a long time."

"How long?"

Billings smiled. "That can't be answered, either. It has no mean-

ing. But a long time indeed. I'm getting near the end, though."

"What are you going to do with it? When it's all finished."

"Turn it over to my superiors."

"Who are they?"

"You wouldn't know them."

"Where are they? Are they here in town?"

"Yes. And no. There's no way to answer that. Maybe someday you'll—"

"The report's about us," Tommy said.

Billings turned his head. His keen eyes bored into Tommy. "Oh?"

"It's about us. The report. The book."

"How do you know?"

"I looked at it. I saw the title on the back. It's about the earth, isn't it?"

Billings nodded. "Yes. It's about the earth."

"You're not from here, are you? You're from someplace else. Outside the system."

"How—how do you know that?"

Tommy grinned with superior pride. "I can tell. I have ways."

"How much did you see in the report?"

"Not much. What's it for? Why are you making it? What are they going to do with it?"

BILLINGS considered a long time before he answered. At

last he spoke. "That," he said, "depends on *those*." He gestured toward the wood frame. "What they do with the report depends on how Project C works."

"Project C?"

"The third project. There've been only two others before. They wait a long time. Each project is planned carefully. New factors are considered at great length before any decision is reached."

"Two others?"

"Antennae for these. A complete new arrangement of the cognitive faculties. Almost no dependence on innate drives. Greater flexibility. Some decrease in overall emotional index, but what they lose in libido energy they gain in rational control. I would expect more emphasis on individual experience, rather than dependence on traditional group learning. Less stereotyped thinking. More rapid advance in situation control."

Billings' words made little sense. Tommy was lost. "What were the others like?" he asked.

"The others? Project A was a long time ago. It's dim in my mind. Wings."

"Wings?"

"They were winged, depending on mobility and possessing considerable individualistic characteristics. In the final analysis we allowed them too much self-dependence. Pride. They had concepts

of pride and honor. They were fighters. Each against the other. Divided into atomized antagonistic factions and—"

"What were the rest like?"

Billings knocked his pipe against the railing. He continued, speaking more to himself than to the boy standing in front of him. "The winged type was our first attempt at high-level organisms. Project A. After it failed we went into conference. Project B was the result. We were certain of success. We eliminated many of the excessive individualistic characteristics and substituted a group orientation process. A herd method of learning and experiencing. We hoped general control over the project would be assured. Our work with the first project convinced us that greater supervision would be necessary if we were to be successful."

"What did the second kind look like?" Tommy asked, searching for a meaningful thread in Billings' dissertation.

"We removed the wings, as I said. The general physiognomy remained the same. Although control was maintained for a short time, this second type also fractured away from the pattern, splintering into self-determined groups beyond our supervision. There is no doubt that surviving members of the initial type A were instru-

mental in influencing them. We should have exterminated the initial type as soon—"

"Are there any left?"

"Of Project B? Of course." Billings was irritated. "You're Project B. That's why I'm down here. As soon as my report is complete the final disposition of your type can be effected. There is no doubt my recommendation will be identical with that regarding Project A. Since your Project has moved out of jurisdiction to such a degree that for all intents and purposes you are no longer functional—"

But Tommy wasn't listening. He was bent over the wood frame, peering down at the tiny figures within. Nine little people, men and women both. Nine — and no more in all the world.

Tommy began to tremble. Excitement rushed through him. A plan was dawning, bursting alive inside him. He held his face rigid, his body tense.

"I guess I'll be going." He moved from the porch, back into the room toward the hall door.

"Going?" Billings got to his feet. "But—"

"I have to go. It's getting late. I'll see you later." He opened the hall door. "Goodbye."

"Goodbye," Mr. Billings said, surprised. "I hope I'll see you again, young man."

"You will," Tommy said.

HE ran home as fast as he could. He raced up the porch steps and inside the house.

"Just in time for dinner," his mother said, from the kitchen.

Tommy halted on the stairs. "I have to go out again."

"No you don't! You're going to —"

"Just for awhile. I'll be right back." Tommy hurried up to his room and entered, glancing around.

The bright yellow room. Pennants on the walls. The big dresser and mirror, brush and comb, model airplanes, pictures of baseball players. The paper bag of bottle caps. The small radio with its cracked plastic cabinet. The wooden cigar boxes full of junk, odds and ends, things he had collected.

Tommy grabbed up one of the cigar boxes and dumped its contents out on the bed. He stuck the box under his jacket and headed out of the room.

"Where are you going?" his father demanded, lowering his evening newspaper and looking up.

"I'll be back."

"Your mother said it was time for dinner. Didn't you hear her?"

"I'll be back. This is important." Tommy pushed the front door open. Chill evening air blew in, cold and thin. "Honest. Real

important."

"Ten minutes." Vince Jackson looked at his wristwatch. "No longer. Or you don't get any dinner."

"Ten minutes." Tommy slammed the door. He ran down the steps, out into the darkness.

A LIGHT showed, flickering under the bottom and through the keyhole of Mr. Billings' room.

Tommy hesitated a moment. Then he raised his hand and knocked. For a time there was silence. Then a stirring sound. The sound of heavy footsteps.

The door opened. Mr. Billings peered out into the hall.

"Hello," Tommy said.

"You're back!" Mr. Billings opened the door wide and Tommy walked quickly into the room. "Did you forget something?"

"No."

Billings closed the door. "Sit down. Would you like anything? An apple? Some milk?"

"No." Tommy wandered nervously around the room, touching things here and there, books and papers and bundles of clippings.

Billings watched the boy a moment. Then he returned to his desk, seating himself with a sigh. "I think I'll continue with my report. I hope to finish very soon." He tapped a pile of notes beside him. "The last of them. Then I

can leave here and present the report along with my recommendations."

Billings bent over his immense typewriter, tapping steadily away. The relentless rumble of the ancient machine vibrated through the room. Tommy turned and stepped out of the room, onto the porch.

In the cold evening air the porch was pitch black. He halted, adjusting to the darkness. After a time he made out the sacks of fertilizer, the rickety chair. And in the center, the wood frame with its wire netting over it, heaps of dirt and grass piled around.

Tommy glanced back into the room. Billings was bent over the typewriter, absorbed in his work. He had taken off his dark blue coat and hung it over the chair. He was working in his vest, his sleeves rolled up.

Tommy squatted beside the frame. He slid the cigar box from under his jacket and laid it down, lid open. He grasped the netting and pried it back, loose from the row of nails.

From the frame a few faint apprehensive squeaks sounded. Nervous scuttlings among the dried grass.

Tommy reached down, feeling among the grass and plants. His fingers closed over something, a small thing that squirmed in fright, twisting in wild terror. He drop-

ped it into the cigar box and sought another.

In a moment he had them all. Nine of them, all nine in the wood cigar box.

He closed the lid and slipped it back under his jacket. Quickly he left the porch, returning to the room.

Billings glanced up vaguely from his work, pen in one hand, papers in the other. "Did you want to talk to me?" he murmured, pushing up his glasses.

Tommy shook his head. "I have to go."

"Already? But you just came!"

"I have to go." Tommy opened the door to the hall. "Goodnight."

Billings rubbed his forehead wearily, his face lined with fatigue. "All right, boy. Perhaps I'll see you again before I leave." He resumed his work, tapping slowly away at the great typewriter, bent with fatigue.

Tommy shut the door behind him. He ran down the hall, down the stairs, outside on the porch. Against his chest the cigar box shook and moved. Nine. All nine of them. He had them all. Now they were his. They belonged to him — and there weren't any more of them, anywhere in the world. His plan had worked perfectly.

He hurried down the street toward his own house, as fast as he could run.

HE found an old cage out in the garage he had once kept white rats in. He cleaned it and carried it upstairs to his room. He spread papers on the floor of the cage and fixed a water dish and some sand.

When the cage was ready he emptied the contents of the cigar box into it.

The nine tiny figures huddled together in the center of the cage, a little bundle of pink. Tommy shut the door of the cage and fastened it tightly. He carried the cage to the dresser and then drew a chair up by it so he could watch.

The nine little people began to move around hesitantly, exploring the cage. Tommy's heart beat with rapid excitement as he watched them.

He had got them away from Mr. Billings. They were his, now. And Mr. Billings didn't know where he lived or even his name.

They were talking to each other. Moving their antennae rapidly, the way he had seen ants do. One of the little people came over to the side of the cage. He stood gripping the wire, peering out into the room. He was joined by another, a female. They were naked. Except for the hair on their heads they were pink and smooth.

He wondered what they ate. From the big refrigerator in the kitchen he took some cheese and

some hamburger, adding crumbled up bits of bread and lettuce leaves and a little plate of milk.

They liked the milk and the bread. But they left the meat alone. The lettuce leaves they used to begin the making of little huts.

Tommy was fascinated. He watched them all the next morning before school, then again at lunch time, and all afternoon until dinner.

"What you got up there?" his Dad demanded, at dinner.

"Nothing."

"You haven't got a snake, have you?" his Mom asked apprehensively. "If you have another snake up there, young man—"

"No." Tommy shook his head, bolting down his meal. "It's not a snake."

He finished eating and ran upstairs.

The little creatures had finished fixing their huts out of the lettuce leaves. Some were inside. Others were wandering around the cage, exploring it.

Tommy seated himself before the dresser and watched. They were smart. A lot smarter than the white rats he had owned. And cleaner. They used the sand he had put there for them. They were smart—and quite tame.

After awhile Tommy closed the door of the room. Holding his breath he unfastened the cage,

opening one side wide. He reached in his hand and caught one of the little men. He drew him out of the cage and then opened his hand carefully.

The little man clung to his palm, peering over the edge and up at him, antennae waving wildly.

"Don't be afraid," Tommy said.

THE little man got cautiously to his feet. He walked across Tommy's palm, to his wrist. Slowly he climbed Tommy's arm, glancing over the side. He reached Tommy's shoulder and stopped, gazing up into his face.

"You're sure small," Tommy said. He got another one from the cage and put the two of them on the bed. They walked around the bed for a long time. More had come to the open side of the cage and were staring cautiously out onto the dresser. One found Tommy's comb. He inspected it, tugging at the teeth. A second joined him. The two tiny creatures tugged at the comb, but without success.

"What do you want?" Tommy asked. After a while they gave up. They found a nickel lying on the dresser. One of them managed to turn it up on end. He rolled it. The nickel gained speed, rushing toward the edge of the dresser. The tiny men ran after it in consternation. The nickel fell over the side.

"Be careful," Tommy warned. He didn't want anything to happen to them. He had too many plans. It would be easy to rig up things for them to do—like fleas he had seen at the circus. Little carts to pull. Swings, slides. Things they could operate. He could train them, and then charge admission.

Maybe he could take them on tour. Maybe he'd even get a write-up in the newspaper. His mind raced. All kinds of things. Endless possibilities. But he had to start out easy—and be careful.

The next day he took one to school in his pocket, inside a fruit-jar. He punched holes in the lid so it could breathe.

At recess he showed it to Dave and Joan Grant. They were fascinated.

"Where did you get it?" Dave demanded.

"That's my business."

"Want to sell it?"

"It's not *it*. It's him."

Joan blushed. "It doesn't have anything on. You better make it put clothes on right away."

"Can you make clothes for them? I have eight more. Four men and four women."

Joan was excited. "I can—if you'll give me one of them."

"The heck I will. They're mine."

"Where did they come from? Who made them?"

"None of your business."

Joan made clothes for the four women. Little skirts and blouses. Tommy lowered the clothing into the cage. The little people moved around the heap uncertainly, not knowing what to do.

"You better show them," Joan said.

"Show them? Nuts to you."

"I'll dress them." Joan took one of the tiny women from the cage and carefully dressed her in a blouse and skirt. She dropped the figure back in. "Now let's see what happens."

The others crowded around the dressed woman, plucking curiously at the clothing. Presently they began to divide up the remaining clothes, some taking blouses, some skirts.

Tommy laughed and laughed. "You better make pants for the men. So they'll all be dressed."

He took a couple of them out and let them run up and down his arms.

"Be careful," Joan warned. "You'll lose them. They'll get away."

"They're tame. They won't run away. I'll show you." Tommy put them down onto the floor. "We have a game. Watch."

"A game?"

"They hide and I find them."

The figures scampered off, looking for places to hide. In a moment none were in sight. Tommy got down on his hands and knees,

reaching under the dresser, among the bedcovers. A shrill squeak. He had found one.

"See? They like it." He carried them back to the cage, one by one. The last one stayed hidden a long time. It had got into one of the dresser drawers, down in a bag of marbles, pulling the marbles over its head.

"They're clever," Joan said. "Wouldn't you give me even one of them?"

"No," Tommy said emphatically. "They're mine. I'm not letting them get away from me. I'm not giving any of them to *anybody*."

TOMMY met Joan after school the next day. She had made little trousers and shirts for the men.

"Here." She gave them to him. They walked along the sidewalk. "I hope they fit."

"Thanks." Tommy took the clothes and put them in his pocket. They cut across the vacant lot. At the end of the lot Dave Grant and some kids were sitting around in a circle, playing marbles.

"Who's winning?" Tommy said, stopping.

"I am," Dave said, not looking up.

"Let me play." Tommy dropped down. "Come on." He held out his hand. "Give me your agate."

Dave shook his head. "Get away."

Tommy punched him on the arm. "Come on! Just one shot." He considered. "Tell you what—"

A shadow fell over them.

Tommy looked up. And blanched.

Edward Billings gazed down silently at the boy, leaning on his umbrella, its metal point lost in the soft ground. He said nothing. His aged face was lined and hard, his eyes like faded blue stones.

Tommy got slowly to his feet. Silence had fallen over the children. Some of them scrambled away, snatching up their marbles.

"What do you want?" Tommy demanded. His voice was dry and husky, almost inaudible.

Billings' cold eyes bored into him, two keen orbs, without warmth of any kind. "You took them. I want them back. Right away." His voice was hard, colorless. He held out his hand. "Where are they?"

"What are you talking about?" Tommy muttered. He backed away. "I don't know what you mean."

"The Project. You stole them from my room. I want them back."

"The heck I did. What do you mean?"

Billings turned toward Dave Grant. "He's the one you meant, isn't he?"

Dave nodded. "I saw them. He has them in his room. He won't let anybody near them."

"You came and stole them. *Why?*" Billings moved toward Tommy ominously. "Why did you take them? What do you want with them?"

"You're crazy," Tommy murmured, but his voice trembled. Dave Grant said nothing. He looked away sheepishly. "It's a lie," Tommy said.

Billings grabbed him. Cold, ancient hands gripped him, digging into his shoulders. "Give them back! I want them. I'm responsible for them."

"Let go." Tommy jerked loose. "I don't have them with me." He caught his breath. "I mean—"

"Then you do have them. At home. In your room. Bring them here. Go and get them. All nine."

Tommy put his hands in his pockets. Some of his courage was returning. "I don't know," he said. "What'll you give me?"

Billings' eyes flashed. "Give you?" He raised his arm threateningly. "Why, you little—"

Tommy jumped back. "You can't make me return them. You don't have any control over us." He grinned boldly. "You said so yourself. We're out of your power. I heard you say so."

Billings' face was like granite. "I'll take them. They're mine. They belong to me."

"If you try to take them I'll call the cops. And my Dad'll be

there. My Dad and the cops."

Billings gripped his umbrella. He opened and shut his mouth, his face a dark, ugly red. Neither he nor Tommy spoke. The other kids gazed at the two of them wide-eyed, awed and subdued.

Suddenly a thought twisted across Billings' face. He looked down at the ground, the crude circle and the marbles. His cold eyes flickered. "Listen to this. I will—I will play against you for them."

"What?"

"The game. Marbles. If you win you can keep them. If I win I get them back at once. All of them."

Tommy considered, glancing from Mr. Billings down at the circle on the ground. "If I win you won't ever try to take them? You will let me keep them—for good?"

"Yes."

"All right." Tommy' moved away. "It's a deal. If you win you can have them back. But if I win they belong to me. And you don't ever get them back."

"Bring them here at once."

"Sure. I'll go get them." — And my agate, too, he thought to himself. "I'll be right back."

"I'll wait here," Mr. Billings said, his huge hands gripping the umbrella.

TOMMY ran down the porch steps, two at a time.

His mother came to the door. "You shouldn't be going out again so late. If you're not home in half an hour you don't get any dinner."

"Half an hour," Tommy cried, running down the dark sidewalk, his hand pressed against the bulge in his jacket. Against the wood cigar box that moved and squirmed. He ran and ran, gasping for breath.

Mr. Billings was still standing by the edge of the lot, waiting silently. The sun had set. Evening was coming. The children had gone home. As Tommy stepped onto the vacant lot a chill, hostile wind moved among the weeds and grass, flapping against his pant legs.

"Did you bring them?" Mr. Billings demanded.

"Sure." Tommy halted, his chest rising and falling. He reached slowly under his jacket and brought out the heavy wood cigar box. He slipped the rubber band off it, lifting the lid a crack. "In here."

Mr. Billings came close, breathing hoarsely. Tommy snapped the lid shut and restored the rubber band. "We have to play." He put the box down on the ground. "They're mine—unless you win them back."

Billings subsided. "All right. Let's begin, then."

Tommy searched his pockets. He brought out his agate, holding it carefully. In the fading light

the big red-black marble gleamed, rings of sand and white. Like Jupiter. An immense, hard marble.

"Here we go," Tommy said. He knelt down, sketching a rough circle on the ground. He emptied out a sack of marbles into the ring. "You got any?"

"Any?"

"Marbles. What are you going to shoot with?"

"One of yours."

"Sure." Tommy took a marble from the ring and tossed it to him. "Want me to shoot first?"

Billings nodded.

"Fine." Tommy grinned. He took aim carefully, closing one eye. For a moment his body was rigid, set in an intense, hard arc. Then he shot. Marbles rattled and clinked, rolling out of the circle and into the grass and weeds beyond. He had done well. He gathered up his winnings, collecting them back in the cloth sack.

"Is it my turn?" Billings asked.

"No. My agate's still in the ring." Tommy squatted down again. "I get another shot."

He shot. This time he collected three marbles. Again his agate was within the circle.

"Another shot," Tommy said, grinning. He had almost half. He knelt and aimed, holding his breath. Twenty-four marbles remained. If he could get four more he would have won. Four more—

He shot. Two marbles left the circle. And his agate. The agate rolled out, bouncing into the weeds.

Tommy collected the two marbles and the agate. He had nineteen in all. Twenty-two remained in the ring.

"Okay," he murmured reluctantly. "It's your shot this time. Go ahead."

EDWARD Billings knelt down stiffly, gasping and tottering. His face was gray. He turned his marble around in his hand uncertainly.

"Haven't you ever played before?" Tommy demanded. "You don't know how to hold it, do you?"

Billings shook his head. "No."

"You have to get it between your first finger and your thumb." Tommy watched the stiff old fingers fumble with the marble. Billings dropped it once and picked it quickly up again. "Your thumb makes it go. Like this. Here, I'll show you."

Tommy took hold of the ancient fingers and bent them around the marble. Finally he had them in place. "Go ahead." Tommy straightened up. "Let's see how you do."

The old man took a long time. He gazed at the marbles in the ring, his hand shaking. Tommy

could hear his breathing, the hoarse, deep panting, in the damp evening air.

The old man glanced at the cigar box resting in the shadows. Then back at the circle. His fingers moved—

There was a flash. A blinding flash. Tommy gave a cry, wiping at his eyes. Everything spun, lashing and tilting. He stumbled and fell, sinking into the wet weeds. His head throbbed. He sat on the ground, rubbing his eyes, shaking his head, trying to see.

At last the drifting sparks cleared. He looked around him, blinking.

The circle was empty. There were no marbles in the ring. Billings had got them all.

Tommy reached out. His fingers touched something hot. He jumped. It was a fragment of glass, a glowing red fragment of molten glass. All around him, in the damp weeds and grass, fragments of glass gleamed, cooling slowly into darkness. A thousand splinters of stars, glowing and fading around him.

Edward Billings stood up slowly, rubbing his hands together. "I'm glad that's over," he gasped. "I'm too old to bend down like that."

His eyes made out the cigar box, lying on the ground.

"Now they can go back. And

I can continue with my work." He picked up the wood box, putting it under his arm. He gathered up his umbrella and shuffled away, toward the sidewalk beyond the lot.

"Goodbye," Billings said, stopping for a moment. Tommy said nothing.

Billings hurried off down the sidewalk, the cigar box clutched tightly.

HE entered his apartment, breathing rapidly. He tossed his black umbrella into the corner and sat down before the desk, laying the cigar box in front of him. For a moment he sat, breathing deeply and gazing down at the brown and white square of wood and cardboard.

He had won. He had got them back. They were his, again. And just in time. The filing date for the report was practically upon him.

Billings slid out of his coat and vest. He rolled up his sleeves, trembling a little. He had been lucky. Control over the B type was extremely limited. They were virtually out of jurisdiction. That, of course, was the problem itself. Both the A and B types had managed to escape supervision. They had rebelled, disobeying orders and therefore putting themselves outside the limit of the plan.

But these—the new type, Proj-

ect C. Everything depended on them. They had left his hands, but now they were back again. Under control, as intended. Within the periphery of supervisory instruction.

Billings slid the rubber band from the box. He raised the lid, slowly and carefully.

Out they swarmed—fast. Some headed to the right, some to the left. Two columns of tiny figures racing off, head down. One reached the edge of the desk and leaped. He landed on the rug, rolling and falling. A second jumped after him, then a third.

Billings broke out of his paralysis. He grabbed frantically, wildly. Only two remained. He swiped at one and missed. The other—

He grabbed it, squeezing it tight between his clenched fingers. Its companion wheeled. It had something in its hand. A splinter. A splinter of wood, torn from the inside of the cigar box.

It ran up and stuck the end of the splinter into Billings' finger.

Billings gasped in pain. His fingers flew open. The captive tumbled out, rolling on its back. Its companion helped it up, half-dragging it to the edge of the desk. Together the two of them leaped.

Billings bent down, groping for them. They scampered rapidly, toward the door to the porch. One

of them was at the lamp plug. It tugged. A second joined it and the two tiny figures pulled together. The lamp cord came out of the wall. The room plunged into darkness.

Billings found the desk drawer. He yanked it open, spilling its contents onto the floor. He found some big sulphur matches and lit one.

They were gone—out onto the porch.

Billings hurried after them. The match blew out. He lit another, shielding it with his hand.

The creatures had got to the railing. They were going over the edge, catching hold of the ivy and swinging down into the darkness.

He got to the edge too late. They were gone, all of them. All nine, over the side of the roof, into the blackness of the night.

Billings ran downstairs and out onto the back porch. He reached the ground, hurrying around the side of the house, where the ivy grew up the side.

Nothing moved. Nothing stirred. Silence. No sign of them anywhere.

They had escaped. They were gone. They had worked out a plan of escape and put it into operation. Two columns, going in opposite directions, as soon as the lid was lifted. Perfectly timed and executed.

Slowly Billings climbed the

stairs to his room. He pushed the door open and stood, breathing deeply, dazed from the shock.

They were gone. Project C was already over. It had gone like the others. The same way. Rebellion and independence. Out from supervision. Beyond control. Project A had influenced Project B—and now, in the same way, the contamination had spread to C.

Billings sat down heavily at his desk. For a long time he sat immobile, silent and thoughtful, gradual comprehension coming to him. It was not his fault. It had happened before—twice before. And it would happen again. Each Project would carry the discontent to the next. It would never end, no matter how many Projects were conceived and put into operation. The rebellion and escape. The evasion of the plan.

After a time Billings reached out and pulled his big report book to him. Slowly he opened it to the place he had left off. From the report he removed the entire last section. The summary. There was no use scrapping the current Project. One Project was as good as any other. They would all be equal—equal failures.

He had known as soon as he saw them. As soon as he had raised the lid. They had clothes on. Little suits of clothing. Like the others, a long time before.

★ Dust Free — Luna! ★

FOR a long time, in the interests of authenticity, writers have known that the surface of the Moon consisted of a layer of pumice dust whose depth was thought to be at least ankle deep. This convincing picture may require modification according to the latest astronomical reports!

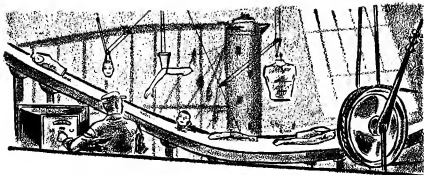
It seems that the surface of the Moon may have a layer of pumice dust all right—but only a few thousandths of an inch thick. Admittedly formed by the erosive action

of alternate heating and cooling by the Sun, this thin dust layer is a far cry from the picturesque blanket once imagined. The discovery of this new information was a spectroscopic determination.

It was reinforced by calculation too. Evidence indicated the popularly assumed erosion theory is all right, but for thicknesses of dust hitherto assumed, eons of time—beyond what we know—would be necessary to form it. Apparently Luna is cleaner than we thought!



"Good news, doctor! She doesn't see them anymore!"



BLESSED ARE THE MEEKBOTS

By

Daniel F. Galouye

Paul was certain the meekbots were held in slavery by their human masters. But freeing them posed a problem — did they really want it?

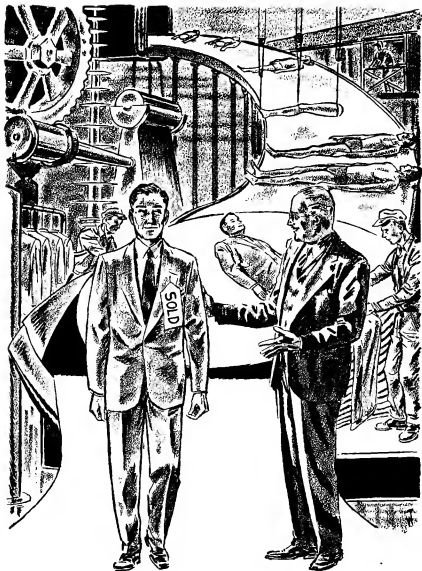
PAUL Davis tapped his thumbnail nervously with his pencil as he paced in front of the witness.

"You admit, then, Mr. Cardovan," he stopped and faced the man who sat stiffly in the chair, "that the Meekbots are, for all practical purposes, human?"

Cardovan ran a hand over his balding head, looking hesitatingly at the judge.

"I fail to see, counselor," Judge Harlan Heffler broke in, hands folded, "where the degree to which Meekbots are — humanized is at all relevant to your clients' petition for an injunction."

Paul drew himself erect and stared blandly at the judge. "I am pleading, your honor, for twenty-five signers of a petition who represent the unspoken sentiments of millions — that the Meekbots



are human. They all believe a Meekbot *actually suffers* the pain which he intercepts from a master."

"But," the judge protested, "the defendants have already offered evidence that there is no suffering. Meekbots have been exhibited in the process of intercepting pain. There was no outward sign that the discomfort was a conscious sensation."

"Let us say, your honor, that my clients are of the belief that although there are no outcries on the part of the Meekbots — no grimaces or other overt evidences — the pain is actually felt. Suppressing the outward evidence does not remove the inward appreciation of pain."

"Very well, then, you may proceed . . . Answer the question, Mr. Cardovan."

"Meekbots," the witness explained, "are precise duplications of a human prototype."

"Your own physical form of twenty years ago, I understand," Paul interrupted.

Cardovan nodded. "I used myself as the mold when I perfected the organic molecular duplication process. Since then, all Meekbots have been duplicates of the original one."

"Therefore, they are exactly human, physically?"

"With the exception that they

feel no pain—neither their own, nor the individual humans' to whom they are attuned." Cardovan glowered at Paul.

"Will you tell the court something about the process?"

"Nothing at all." Cardovan was adamant. "It is secret. And I intend to maintain my company's singular position . . ."

"I am asking only for generalities."

Cardovan looked quizzically at the judge.

"You may describe as much of the process," Judge Heffler said, "as you deem will not jeopardize your business."

The witness spoke in clipped tones. "The Meekbot is mentally infantile for several weeks after his creation. But learning, with a fully developed body, is rapid. Part of the rapidity is due to the fact that the total pattern of stimuli and response is built up on the basis of reward rather than punishment. How this is done, I do not choose to disclose. However, it will suffice to say that personal pain, or pain realized through mental transfer from a master human, is denied access to the conscious of the Meekbot."

"What about the subconscious?" Paul asked eagerly.

"We've never had a neurotic Meekbot," Cardovan said acidly.

"How long is a Meekbot main-

tained by the producer before he is assigned to an individual and mentally attuned to that person?"

"Five years."

"And, from the moment that he is assigned, he becomes the registrar of all pain for that person?"

"It not only becomes the receptor of the person's pain, but also his concerns and worries."

"In other words," Paul approached the witness, "when I apply the tip of this sharpened pencil to the flesh of your hand, you are aware of no pain?"

He forced down the point until he felt the skin puncture under the pressure.

"I feel only pressure," said Cardovan. "However, my Meekbot, in the absence of physical proximity, informs me telepathically there is pain in my hand."

Blood began to flow around the pencil point.

"The court reminds the counselor for the petitioners," interrupted the judge threateningly, "that such action could constitute battery, should Mr. Cardovan be inclined to prefer charges."

"**A**ND what if you can't prove the Meekbots feel pain?" Audrey Davis asked pointedly, looking up over the rim of her cup of coffee.

Paul walked to the window and stared out at the myriad lights of

the city. "Then I suppose I'll lose the case." He shrugged. "I rather imagine I'll lose it anyway."

His wife placed the cup and saucer on the table and stood by his side. "Then the proof of pain seems to be the only hope?"

"I've tried everything else. We have already argued that the Meekbot is a flesh and blood version of a thinking machine. One that not only intercepts pain and assumes all worries, but also acts as general nursemaid to the attuned human; is robbing him of his incentive."

"Why are you so sure they feel pain?"

"They've *got* to, honey. Don't you realize that here's something *completely* human? Doesn't it seem illogical they would differ in only one respect—the inability to be hurt? They must feel it and suppress the outward indications."

"But how can they keep from showing it?"

"How Cardovan does it I don't know. Hypnosis will repress it in humans, you know."

"If it is suppressed, why worry? That means they don't feel anything."

"But they *must* be aware of it! The mere fact that they are able to inform the master human that he's feeling pain, to gauge its intensity, proves they have some sort of pain-reception mechanism . . .

Only no one wants to admit it. The Meekbots are 'good things' and nobody wants to be deprived of eventually owning one."

Audrey returned to the sofa and poured another cup of coffee. "Why don't you withdraw the petition, Paul? If it's all so hopeless . . ."

"I'm even more sold on fighting this thing through than the petitioners," he said resolutely. "It's not just the fact that the Meekbots are the prime scapegoats of all history, but it's also the effects this thing will have on the race. If individuals don't concern themselves with problems, where will future advances in science and technology come from?"

"Cardovan," she reminded, "says the Meekbot is a thinking machine in a human body that draws on the intelligence of its own mind and the mind of its master to solve the problems of the engineer, the doctor, the chemist."

"Even if that's true, it's no excuse for the existence of the Meekbots. The whole thing is nothing but slavery under a different name . . . humans in bondage to humans; compelled to do the master's bidding, his thinking; to grant his wishes—even to feel his pain! To sleep when the master sleeps, to work when the master works."

She reached up and pulled him

down to the sofa. "Let's forget about the Meekbots for a while," she suggested. "I don't think you were very wise in taking the case. It may very well hurt your candidacy for the governorship. Groups in other cities have tried to get injunctions against the distribution of Meekbots. None of them has succeeded."

He was on his feet again, pacing. "But somebody has to succeed! They were illegal at one time—before Cardovan perfected his pain-transfer process, before he learned how to attune them receptively to the minds of individuals. When they were just plain androids, everybody realized the folly of increasing the population with robots that could do nothing more than humans could already do. Pain transfer was just the sugar-coating that made them immediately acceptable."

Audrey was looking absently at the wall beyond him. "I wonder," she said thoughtfully, "how the Meekbots feel about all this."

Paul started. "Of course!" he said impulsively. "Nobody's ever thought of asking a Meekbot! And there's nothing in the books that says I can't get a continuance of hearing and they can't be subpoenaed!"

PAUL looked hesitatingly at the figure in the witness chair,

comparing him with Cardovan who sat at the table for the defense. The Meekbot might have been the son of the latter, so much did they resemble each other. After all, he reminded himself, the Meekbot was but a replica of the Cardovan of two decades ago.

"Will you please state your name, or designation?" Paul directed.

"I am Meekbot 187640, Fenwick Conrad Cardovan II." It was a clear, sonorous voice.

But Paul wondered whether he had detected undue hesitation in the response.

"You are assigned to Fenwick Cardovan?"

The Meekbot hesitated again. This time he glanced at his owner. "Yes."

"Are you a rational thinker?"

"I am."

"Yet you do not resent your status of slavery? You have no sense of personal freedom?"

Once more there was a hint of confusion on the Meekbot's face. Then he spoke abruptly. "I am as free as Fenwick Cardovan. Together we are one individual. By correlating our mental facilities, we are able to achieve more than two individuals would separately. There is no slavery."

"And you are satisfied to receive all the pain due yourself and your master?"

Judge Heffler cleared his throat. "I fail to see any relevancy. What are you trying to prove, counselor?"

"There are thousands of Meekbots assigned to individuals who have been able to purchase them. Each day hundreds more are being turned out by Mr. Cardovan's bio-factories. They are humans. Yet, they are but slaves, suffering under the most heinous system of bondage that has ever been devised—not only physical bondage, but also complete *mental* bon . . ."

Elrod Pittman, Cardovan's attorney, lunged up and thumped his fist on the tabletop. "I must object to the counselor's rhetorical evasion of the interrogation from the bench. Instead of stating his argumentative purpose, he is merely indulging in false homilies intended to further his candidacy for governor."

"You will answer my question directly." The judge stared intently at Paul.

"I am seeking first to establish the complete humanity of the Meekbot," Paul said patiently. "Then . . ."

Pittman turned to face him. "We offer no defense against that contention. They are *admittedly* completely human. For, only in such form can they be attuned to an individual and be expected to co-operate with him in mental

procedures."

Paul looked patiently at the judge, received the judicial nod to continue, then turned to the Meekbot.

"What do you . . . ?"

Cardovan II's face twitched, almost imperceptibly, and there was a slight, spasmodic motion of his lower lip. Then he started and turned to stare at Cardovan.

The latter drew his handkerchief from his coat pocket and pressed it against his mouth. At the same moment, Cardovan II relaxed.

"Will you explain to the court what has just transpired?" Paul eagerly asked the witness.

"Yes," the Meekbot said casually. "Mr. Cardovan unconsciously bit his lip—rather forcibly. I informed him of the resultant sensation and the flow of blood which I sensed."

"Which you sensed as pain?" Paul suggested enthusiastically.

"Which I merely sensed as a slight discomfiture of the type which I am trained to interpret as pain."

"I saw you wince."

"You are mistaken."

"Your honor," Paul turned to the judge, "this Meekbot is lying."

"I observed nothing," commented Heffler.

Paul realized suddenly he was getting nowhere. Although he had

spoken with Meekbots before, he had no reason to believe they would be as non-co-operative a witness as this one was proving to be. On the contrary, the others were genial.

After a pause, he continued warily, "You assume all the worry, concern that is entertained in the mind of Fenwick Cardovan?"

"That which is too disquieting."

"And you do not find it too disquieting for you?"

"I can better correlate the causative factors and supply a solution."

Paul tensed. Of course a Meekbot as a witness would be non-co-operative! Cardovan had complete control over this one! Each Meekbot was totally subservient to its master. With the mental bond that existed between slave and master, the situation was tantamount to having the master put words in the mouth of the Meekbot.

"I am through with the witness, your honor," Paul said resignedly.

"DON'T you see, Audrey? It'll have to be a free Meekbot if I'm going to get anywhere!"

His wife was as glumly silent as he had been throughout the Saturday breakfast.

"Anyone who owns a Meekbot," he continued with enlightenment, "will naturally want to hold on to

him. Any answers we get will only be to the advantage of Cardovan's side!"

"Then," she said pensively, "you'll have to find someone who is willing to join the crusade and relinquish his Meekbot. Do you know anyone who might?"

He shook his head disheartenedly. "Maybe I can go to the distributor and . . ."

"Attune yourself to one?" she completed.

"Indeed not! That would seem to be the proper solution, but it wouldn't set right—either with my clients or with my own professional pride."

"You don't suppose they'll *lend* you one?"

He looked at her thoughtfully.

An hour later he toyed with the carved dog face on the arm rest of the chair in the reception room of A. F. Felton, Inc., Meekbot Distributors. Felton, he had heard him say at the hearing, would be out of town over the weekend.

It was unlikely, Paul assumed, that anyone else would recognize him as the opposition attorney. He had accepted the case too late to be the subject of newspaper publicity which the previous counselor had received until he cast the entire litigation into the humorous-feature category by becoming a Meekbot owner himself.

The receptionist beckoned and he followed her into the office of Morris Raymond. The general manager gave no indication he had recognized Paul.

"If you are interested in a Meekbot, Mr. Davis," he offered, "you would have been accommodated much quicker if you had applied through the normal channel."

"But my case is something of an exception. I'm interested in acquiring one under a special condition."

The manager sighed forlornly and looked down at his hands. "I see . . . You want to buy one and not have it attuned to your psycho-frequency."

"How did you know?"

Raymond leaned back. "Refusing such requests almost completely comprises my duties here. You are not the first 'crusader' who wants to buy 'a Meekbot's freedom.'"

Paul waited a moment. "And I suppose you don't do business that way?"

"Unfortunately not. We could trouble our sales if we did. However, it has been the policy of the producer not to entertain such sales. As you know, Meekbots were outlawed a few years ago because the government was convinced of the inutility of producing individuals merely for the sake of increasing the population."

"That's absurd! What if I should buy one, then decide I no longer wanted it?"

"You can be relieved of your relationship with a Meekbot only through our disassociative procedure. But I assure you—once a Meekbot owner, always an owner. None of the distribution houses has ever had to relieve an owner. The disassociative section has existed thus far only for real-locating Meekbots whose owners have died."

"Then there *are* free Meekbots?—They become temporarily free on the death of their owners?"

"Not at all. A compulsion is engrained in each to return to his distribution point as soon as the mental bond is broken. The set-up to preclude the existence of free Meekbots is fool proof."

Paul took a deep breath despairingly. There was no hope for the Meekbot. He must remain a slave when he had no master.

"However," Raymond continued enthusiastically, "I'm quite sure you will find there is no justification for a 'free-the-Meekbots' sentiment should you ever become an owner. And our company makes it quite easy for persons even of very moderate means to afford one."

"Sorry, but I'm not interested." Paul rose.

"Now, take my Meekbot," Raymond went on, staring with an-

ticipation at the closed door.

Even while he hesitated, the Meekbot entered and stood beside the desk. For a moment there was silence. Then Raymond smiled.

"He informs me," the manager explained, "that he has arrived at a solution for a quicker and more efficient method of processing applicants. That was a problem over which I would have been concerned tremendously—had I been a single individual."

The Meekbot was smiling genially. He had the expression of a man who had taken delight in a task well done.

Then Morris Raymond II turned to his master. "You mentioned something about eighteen holes this afternoon?"

"Get the car and we'll be on our way." Raymond patted him on the shoulder.

The manager turned to Paul. "Excellent companions . . . Incidentally, his mental efficiency has already paid the price of his purchase in bonuses I've received from the firm. Of course, it's a little inconvenient to fit a stranger into your household—but when they are as subservient as Meekbots, it's no problem at all."

Paul turned to leave.

Raymond called after him, "Take a Meekbot home. You'll find you won't even worry about meeting the payments."

THE visit to the distributing firm had even more firmly convinced Paul that production of Meekbots must be stopped and those in existence must be freed.

He was saying as much to Wilfred Price, first signer of the petition, as he waited in the courtroom for Judge Heffler to call the hearing to order.

"If only we can make the court see it that way too." Price shook his head sullenly. "But there doesn't seem to be much hope."

Paul's silence was agreement.

"At any rate," the other sighed, "this won't be the first time a protest group has been defeated on the Meekbot issue."

"It'll probably be the last. This is the only big city where a legal decision has not been handed down."

Price mopped his forehead with a handkerchief. "Don't they realize they're killing the initiative of those who have become Meekbot owners—the top minds in the country?"

"Not only the top minds . . . I've learned it's quite easy for almost anyone to own a Meekbot."

Price threw up his hands hopelessly. "Then I give up . . . How does the saying go—Blessed are the meek . . . ?"

. . . For they shall inherit the earth, Paul thought as he conjured up a picture of a world of sloven

human idiots sitting idly by as a creeping dementia surged over them. The mental picture also showed Meekbots, reacting under engrained compulsion, reporting back to the laboratories to await futilely reassignment to other masters.

The court crier's harsh voice startled him and Paul began sifting through his notes as attaches flitted around the bench preparing for the proceedings.

Minutes later, August Felton, owner of the local distributing firm, was on the stand and the opposing counselor began questioning him.

"Will you please state whether you have received any complaints from owners of Meekbots?"

"None whatsoever—only praise."

"Have buyers expressed any concern over the fact that their Meekbots are overburdened with pain?"

But Paul was on his feet before Felton could answer. "I object. The witness is not qualified to answer. It has already been established that Meekbot owners are incapable of appreciable concern because all worry is drained from their minds in the existing rapport."

The judge stared at Paul momentarily. "You may answer the question," he said coolly to Felton.

"Let me answer it this way," the witness offered. "No relatives or associates of Meekbot owners—those in a position to observe accurately the reaction of the androids—have ever complained."

"Does your firm," Pittman continued, "feel that its existence is justified on the basis of service to the public?"

"We do."

"Will you explain, please?"

"We regard the Meekbots as heralding a complete revolution in human society. We conceive of the Meekbots as spelling a new age of man. We feel we are on the threshold of the Millennium. Naturally, there will be a diminution of initiative on the part of those who own Meekbots. But we have already restricted ownership to persons over twenty-five. In the future, we see individuals completing their education and finding their niche in society and business before they are allowed the stabilizing companionship of a Meekbot."

"We see a golden age in which . . ."

It was a Utopian picture Felton was painting. And the entire court was gripped in the hypnotic attraction of the word-pictures. Paul listened for a while, with faltering hope.

But he closed his ears to the phrases finally as he realized that

they were beginning to grip him in a web of indecision in which he wondered whether the issue was not actually the freedom of the Meekbots, but rather the advancement of mankind.

There was a tap on his shoulder and he twisted around.

"Audrey!" He was surprised. Then he looked beyond her and started as he saw the Meekbot who stood relaxed, her arms folded, her face expressionless.

"I have a Meekbot, Paul!" she announced excitedly. "You said you couldn't own one. But I could."

It was confusion more than anger that clouded his mind. Hesitatingly, he glanced at Price who sat beside him. But the initial signer of the petition was smiling.

"You should have thought of this before," he said. Then he turned to another who sat at the table. "We have a *free* Meekbot!"

"Free!" the other repeated, incredulous.

"Well, not exactly . . . but one who we can be sure won't be controlled to react unfavorably to us." Price turned back to Paul. "Can we get her on the stand?"

"As soon as Pittman gets through with Felton I'll offer her as a surprise witness."

TINGLING with the excitement of near victory as the Meekbot was sworn, Paul began his

questioning.

"You are Meekbot 392242—Audrey Marlan Davis II?"

But before there was time for an answer, Pittman broke loose from consultation with others around the defense table and rose.

"Your honor, I object to the use of a Meekbot as a witness."

Paul started. "You had no objections when Cardovan II was subpoenaed."

"I have now," Pittman came back acidly.

"What are the grounds for the objection?" asked Judge Heffler.

"The outcome of this hearing," Pittman explained, "will determine whether Meekbots are legally human. Until their humanity has been established, we must assume they are not qualified to take oath. I can cite from any number of litigations elsewhere in the country where that precedent was established and adhered to."

Paul fumed. "This move, counselor, may also be interpreted to indicate you were willing to have a Meekbot questioned who was under control of a person partial to the defense."

"You may interpret it as you will," the other lawyer rejoined coldly.

The judge cleared his throat. "This court is disposed to allow the questioning of the witness to continue, inasmuch as an identical

procedure, favorable to the defense, has already been permitted."

Flushing, Pittman started to speak.

"I remind the counselor," Heffler cut him short, "that there is always the recourse of exception, appeal."

Pittman sat down.

It was a break Paul had not expected. He turned eagerly to the Meekbot. "Do you consider yourself in bondage?"

But Pittman lunged up again. "Isn't it obvious," he raised his voice as he stared pleadingly at the judge, "that the Meekbot will answer as Mrs. Davis directs and is therefore not qualified to be heard by the court?"

Paul glowered at him. "This, then, is an outright admission that Cardovan II answered as Fenwick Cardovan directed?"

Again, the skin above Pittman's collar turned red. But it was only momentary. He smiled immediately. "Then we can only move for the impeachment of all Meekbots as witnesses and for striking out their testimony."

Once more Paul's shoulders sagged with hopelessness. He couldn't win! Only through the Meekbots could he hope to establish the existence of the masked bondage system. If he couldn't find some way to use them in establishing his

proof, he had no case.

"The counselor for the defense," intoned the judge firmly, "will please refrain from further outbursts. His objection has already been entertained . . . You will proceed, Mr. Davis."

But it was the Meekbot who took the judge's cue.

"I am not a slave." She spoke in a whisper. But there was as much conviction in her words as if she had shouted them. "I am part of humanity. I am but a mental extension of an individual. My physical counterpart exists only to sustain the mental processes. I regard myself only as a sensory amplification of a human being."

Paul staggered backward, stunned.

The Meekbot continued in firmer tones, now standing. "I speak with outward compulsion — using only the mental facilities which are contained in the physical form that you see here. I am as 'free' as any human. And I say unequivocally that Meekbots do not suffer under the effects of the pain that they absorb from their masters."

Paul turned and stared dazedly at Audrey. His glance crossed hers. But there was not the surprise he expected to see on her face. Instead, she looked hastily away.

"There is no pain. There is only an informative sensation, of sufficient amplitude to convey the impression that an adjustment must be made in the human—or in the Meekbot, if the pain's origin is in the Meekbot's physical form — to remove the cause of what otherwise would be the source of suffering."

Paul moved hastily toward the bench. "Your honor," he stammered, "I—I move for a recess."

But the attempt to cut short the damaging testimony was not necessary. The Meekbot, obviously finished talking, left the witness chair.

PAUL ran a hand through his tousled hair as he paced in his living room. He turned abruptly and faced Audrey.

"Get that damned thing out of here!" he snapped.

After a moment, the Meekbot rose from her chair near the door and left.

There was an almost plaintive expression on his wife's face as she stared solicitously at him. "I—I would be crying," she said, "if my reactions were normal—if the concern were not being drained off."

He groped for something insulting to say. But instead he resumed pacing. He had to think it out for himself—had to clear his mind so he could evaluate the

factors and determine what had gone wrong.

Could it be possible, he wondered, that he had been in error all along? Had his concern for the Meekbots been misdirected? Was it that they actually felt no pain; that they enjoyed being Meekbots?

He had returned with the intention of loosing a barrage of questions at Audrey, as though he had her under cross-examination. But usually she was quick to volunteer any information he might need. And he was patient.

He stopped suddenly and drew erect, tightening his fists. Would he accomplish anything, he wondered, by violating the principles for which he was fighting — by getting a Meekbot? Was that the only way? He frowned. Maybe he was *afraid* to get one? Could it be that any owner of a Meekbot became the recipient of an all-convincing insight that allowed him to appreciate the human-android relationship in a different, sanctioning light? Maybe only Meekbot owners could grasp the paradox of pain and no pain, slave and no slave.

Audrey stood before him suddenly and put her slender arms about his neck.

"Paul," she said pleadingly, "I want you to get a Meekbot."

He started.

"You *must*," she continued, her words a smooth flow of cool sincerity. "You see, there's a barrier between us now. I love you as I always have. But someone who has been attuned is of a vastly different personality. And I don't see how an attuned and an unattuned person can be at all compatible."

"What are you trying to say?" he asked misgivingly.

"That you're wrong, Paul . . . all wrong. Meekbots are *good*—they're good for us. You don't understand, darling. But I could have forced her to give the answers that you wanted when she was testifying. It would have been simple, you know. Or, the least I could have done would have been to let the Meekbot answer for herself—undirected."

He stiffened. "You mean you *saw to it* that she answered as she did!"

"Oh, Paul!" Her eyes glistened, but she smiled effusively. "It—it's wonderful! You can't imagine what it's like to be attuned! It's like never having a worry in the world. Why—why, darling, you could die right now. And, although I love you very much, I would feel no sorrow. I'm safe! Safe from harm, from pain, from cares. I . . ."

He uncoiled her arms and backed away. Was this why there was

no opposition to Meekbots from the owners? Was it simply that the selfish motive was so strong in every individual that they *refused* to be deprived of their newfound paradise?

"Darling," she continued, pleading. "It really doesn't matter if they feel pain. Meekbots are something we have to have. I—I'd rather die than give up . . ."

His eyes flashed with sudden disgust and he slapped her.

She laughed gaily.

He cursed and struck her again, this time stinging across her mouth. A small trickle of blood ran down across her lip.

But she backed away, still laughing. "It doesn't hurt, you know. Nothing can ever hurt!"

Without warning she lashed out with curled, tensed fingers. The nails raked across his cheek.

"Feel the pain, Paul?" He imagined her laughter was near hysterical now. "It hurts, doesn't it? Maybe you *should* be hurt. Maybe you should suffer a lot so you will know that it's better to let someone—something else do your suffering for you."

Driven by a sudden surge of madness, his hand darted out again—this time balled into a fist. He imagined there was a sudden cry of pain as the blow landed. But Audrey had collapsed immediately . . . and there was only one other per-

son in the apartment—the Meekbot.

Forcing calmness into his voice, Paul picked up the telephone and dialed a number.

"Meekbot Distributors?" he inquired. "I'd like to make an appointment."

THE court attache tapped Paul on the shoulder.

"Judge Heffler would like to see you in his private chamber before the hearing is resumed." The man nodded toward the door to the left of the bench.

As Paul entered, Paul David II followed.

Heffler was donning his robe. A Meekbot sat in the chair behind the desk.

The realization that the judge had been an owner all along struck Paul suddenly. But it didn't seem to make much difference now.

Paul Davis II sat on the edge of the desk. A third Meekbot came in. There had been only one other Meekbot who was a regular attendant at the hearings. It was Cardovan II.

Cardovan II joined the other two androids, lighted a cigarette.

"I understand," Heffler turned and addressed Paul, "that you have finally acquired a Meekbot?"

But before he could answer, Paul Davis II turned to Heffler

II. "Precautions are unnecessary. He is under control."

"Demonstrate," directed Cardovan II.

Davis II reached over and took Cardovan II's cigarette. He pulled back his sleeve and applied the glowing end to the soft skin of his forearm, held it there until the stinging odor of burning flesh filled the room.

Paul wanted to scream under the excruciation. He wanted to rip the sleeve from his arm, blow cooling draughts of air on the imaginary burned area.

But he only stood motionless, his features unflinching as the pain wracked him inwardly.

Cardovan II laughed. "I'm convinced. Pain transfer seems to be complete, so we can assume control is complete." He turned to Heffler II. "We'll wind it up today. You decide in favor of the defendants."

Davis II finally withdrew the glowing end of the cigarette from his arm. Paul felt like fainting in relief. But he was suddenly aware he had been pleading, telepathically, with his Meekbot to remove the cause of the pain. Now he was begging him to treat the

wound, ease the suffering. And all the while he showed no outward sign of anguish.

The Meekbots started out of the room. And Paul received the mental directive to return to his petitioners, smiling. He glanced at Judge Heffler. But he realized abruptly he had not even the volition to inject elements of pity or entreaty in his glance. He felt Paul Davis II's thought control become complete — reaching down even to the level of unconscious gestures.

Cardovan II opened the door for them. "It's been a good show, but certainly worth the trouble. It isn't every day we can get a governor. But before he's elected I want him to take an appeal to the Supreme Court. It's time we started on a national plane."

"What about Wilfred Price II?" asked Heffler II.

"He may rejoin Price. But let it appear as though Price has just bought him. That will be good merchandising and . . ."

The Meekbots were out of hearing range. Still smiling, Paul strode toward his table. How did the beatitude go?—*Blessed are the meek, for they . . . ?*

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See Page 162**

Jerry vowed no woman would ever entice him into matrimony. But of course, that was before Professor Madigan's invention, the —

MAN-TRAP

By

Hal Annas

JERRY Kerran watched the news analyst fade from the screen to be replaced by a woman who looked directly at him and said, "Listen, girls! Professor Madigan's greatest invention. A new kind of magnetism more powerful than gravity. Works as a supplement to a natural magnetism. Can be controlled—"

Kerran switched off the current. "Women," he growled. "Bah!"

He had three rules concerning woman: a) if she won't stay home and neck on the sofa get rid of her; b) if she will stay home and neck on the sofa suspect her of matrimonial intentions and get rid of her; c) don't monkey with her to begin with and avoid the nuisance of bothering with the first two rules.

He rose to his lanky six feet of height, brushed the unruly red hair out of his eyes, strode to the

door and turned the knob. The door swung wide. He glanced about briefly, then looked down and saw the girl.

She had, he realized, removed her highheels. Ordinarily the top of her platinum hair came an inch above his shoulders. Not that he was in the habit of getting close enough to determine this factor accurately, but he couldn't help seeing her enter and leave the apartment across the way from time to time.

"You knocked?" he said brusquely.

Her head was tilted back, her blue eyes wide. "I need a pound of sugar," she said. "My pneumatic is out of order. Can't get deliveries."

"You mean, you cook?" He stared in awe.

"I'm making a cake," she breathed, inching closer.



He backed out of the doorway and she entered. Without giving him another glance, she went to the pneumatic, cut in the phone and ordered a pound of sugar. She turned back to him.

"It shouldn't be a minute I'll wait—if you don't mind."

He had tried to keep himself from studying her. Despite this, his eyes told him that her figure was just about perfect and as both a counteraction and a stimulant to the mounting tension in him, her smile was surprisingly bright and full. There was little danger of the flavor of her warpaint confusing a man. She wore little, if any. Her bright lips and cheeks seemed to need no added color.

"Don't bother to stand," she said considerably. She waited until he had lowered himself to the couch, then dropped down beside him, a trifle too close to allow him to put his mind on other things.

"I hope I haven't troubled you." Her hand brushed his.

"Not at all." He drew his hand away.

"From the looks of your sideboard," she went on cheerily, "you were just getting ready to mix a drink. I'm an expert. Shall I mix a couple?"

He resisted the inclination to rise when she did, and deliberately kept his eyes from following her.

He snatched up the paper, rustled it noisily and tried to concentrate on the headlines.

Two things distracted him. One was the faint scent of perfume and the other was the chinking of ice and glasses. He put the paper aside, tried to put his mind on distant things. This soon palled. He was about to get up and pace the floor when she returned and handed him a cool glass.

"Thanks," he said and leaned back.

She sat down again, so close that her shoulder brushed his. He edged over against the arm of the couch, putting an inch of space between them, glanced sidelong at her, and drank. He rolled his eyes ceilingward, smacked his lips and drank again.

"What did you put in it?"

"About a spoonful of creme de menthe, a couple drops of bitters and about two ounces of rye. Like it?"

He scowled deliberately, arming himself against his feelings. "It's fair—for a woman's mixings. You should have put in more liquor."

"Of course. I'll learn."

"Not from me," he snapped. "I'm a woman-hater."

She leaned toward him. "Why?"

He tossed off the balance of the drink, set the glass on the table

and made a sweeping gesture. "They're all alike," he said brutally. "Fickle and treacherous. Deceivers. Always flinging their sex around."

"Not all women," she countered. "Take this Professor Madigan who discovered that new adhesion force."

"A woman?"

"Of course. Professor Madigan is a scholarly young woman. Her sex appeal might not win a beauty contest, but she discovered a perfectly wonderful man-catcher."

"What?"

"A new force. Works like gravity—only it's different. Its strength increases in ratio to the square of the distance."

"What are you talking about? Women don't understand things like that."

"No?"

"No! Need I spell it out for you? Your delivery should be in the pneumatic by now. Why don't you pick it up and go home and make your cake?"

"I shall. I had no idea I was living next door to a misogynist, and a brutal one at that."

"I don't like women," Kerran said emphatically. "They're all alike. Fickle. Deceivers. Everything about them artificial. Lips, color, shape."

The girl rose and stood over him.

"I'm not wearing make-up," she asserted. "You flatter yourself in thinking I would put on my face to come across the hall."

"Your shape! Your hips aren't that neat!"

The color rose in her cheeks. She lifted a hand as though to strike him. The hand trembled. She lowered it to her side. "I do not wear a girdle. Want to feel?"

"No," he said, his own color rising. "Go on home."

Ignoring the pneumatic, she crossed to the door, snatched it open, marched into the corridor. Through the open doorway he heard the knob turn on her door. He went to the pneumatic, picked up the sugar, strode across the corridor and knocked. In a moment her head appeared, then the door swung wide.

"You forgot something," he said contritely. "Sorry I was rude. I'm a natural woman-hater, and a moment before you came in some wench on television triggered my feelings on the subject . . . Just keep on your own side of the fence and I'll stay on mine. I'll even speak to you occasionally, if you wish, but that's as far as I'll go in neighborliness."

"Thanks," she said. "You're more than kind. But I shan't trouble you. I've just become a man-hater."

Kerran turned to go. Halfway across the corridor he felt something tug at him. It was a steady and increasingly powerful pull, forcing him into the girl's apartment. He lost his balance, reeled through the doorway, came to a halt against the table, noticed that the force still drew him toward the girl on the far side of the table.

"Well?" she said.

"Er-uh, just dropped in. Going right back out."

He got halfway to the door before it again took effect. He leaned against it, dug his feet into the carpet, pushed. He almost reached the door. He could go no farther, knew he was going to be snatched back to the table.

He turned, dug in his heels, braced himself, and then the girl came flying over the table and directly into his arms. Instantly the force released him and he fell with the girl on top.

The platinum hair was in his eyes, against his face, the scent of perfume all about, the full weight of the soft warm flesh pressing him down. Then she struggled up, stood erect.

Getting his feet under him, he said, "I want to apologize. Your shape is natural. You don't wear a girdle. And now I'll be going."

He had scarcely turned before he felt it again. He swung back

quickly, saw that the girl was hanging on the sofa. He lost his balance, went staggering toward her, flung out his arms, and the next thing he knew she was pressing against him, standing on her toes, and her lips were brushing his cheek, and they were moist and warm and soft.

She drew back and said, belligerently, "I wish you'd get out of here."

He started again, hesitated when he felt the force, turned back. "I've heard of magnetic women," he said with restraint. "I never believed in it. But now—" He gestured vaguely. "Please turn off your charms."

She lowered her eyes. "I thought it was you. I've been drawn to you from the first and I thought you'd suddenly become irresistible. Do you mean you feel it too?"

He nodded. "I've read about magnetic women in the best books. Now, dash it, turn it off! I'm getting tired of hanging around here."

"It's you," she insisted. "You turn it off."

He shook his head. "I'm plain as an old shoe. Everybody knows. But you! One look at you and anybody'd know you've got this magnetism. That's why I had to be so brutal. It was the only way I could resist and keep my woman-

hating integrity. I can feel your magnetism now. It's getting stronger."

"And I feel yours. It's pulling me right into your arms."

"Stay back. I can't stand much more. I'm a confirmed misogynist, and if you keep on I'll have to go against my principles, and that wouldn't be honest."

"I can't help it," she murmured from two feet away. "I can't resist you."

Kerran puzzled briefly. "Maybe that's it. I remember when I was overseas. But no! All they wanted was chewing gum and cigarettes. Still, you never can tell. Maybe it came on me suddenly. Maybe looking at you sort of triggered my magnetism."

She smiled. "If you'll quit looking at me maybe we can stop it. Look the other way and I'll try to stop thinking about you because you do something to me."

Kerran nodded. "That's it. Beat it! I'll put my mind on something else."

Visualizing a horse race in which he had his money on the bang-tail just ready to break the tape he didn't feel the tug for several seconds. He struggled mightily but futilely to resist. He wound up in the kitchen where the girl was holding onto the electric range.

"You didn't play fair," he said

accusingly. "Treacherous. Just like all your sex. You thought about me."

She lowered her eyes. "I—I just couldn't help it."

Kerran felt his chest expand involuntarily. "One of us is irresistible," he said. "It isn't you because I positively was not thinking about you. So it must be me." His chest expanded another inch. "I guess a girl who can't resist me would be true. And since we can't beat this force, the only solution is to get married."

She nodded. "That's the only solution. But maybe I don't want to solve the problem. You'll have to persuade me."

The voice from the television in the living room was barely audible in the kitchen: "The new force was originally developed for the purpose of drawing troops into a compact group so they could be atom-bombed. Professor Madigan refused to disclose its secret to be used for that purpose. She pointed out that it had a far more useful potential. A field of it, built into a woman's garments, enables her to attract at a distance the man of her choice. She can control this with a switch conveniently located in a pocket. Her own charms do the rest."

Kerran ignored the telecast. She was in his arms and he had his

face half-buried in her silken hair. "I don't even know your name . . ." he laughed embarrassedly.

Her voice was low and soft as she murmured, "Madigan—Joyce Madigan."

He stiffened suddenly. "You mean you're *Professor* Madigan—"

She snuggled closer against him and somehow it didn't really seem to matter now what her name was. "Let's say I *was* Professor Madigan—a woman's place is in the home, don't you agree?"

After a few emphatic kisses he did.

THE END

★ *The Planets — When?* ★

WITH popular interest in space flight, science-fiction and interplanetary travel higher than it has ever been before, magazines, including the slicks are flooding the reader with "factual" accounts of the state of space travel. The articles quickly gloss over the difficulties, mention casually the Moonrocket which is soon to come, and then proceed to quote von Braun about a Mars-flight that would take "256 days".

Such neat, capsule treatments are interesting, but what is the actual state of potential interplanetary travel today?

The answer is: not good—and a long way off. This is not a pail of cold water dashed on enthusiastic hopes. It is simply a realistic appraisal from the standpoint of the engineer and the scientist. Unless some totally new, unforeseen development in atomic energy takes place, the following is an account of what the score is at present.

First, in the next decade or two—certainly not less time—a small, unmanned, remote-controlled rocket

weighing on arrival maybe a few hundred pounds is going to be planted on the Moon. In fact this event is probably only a few years away, so effective is the result of the V-2 technology. The rocket will start as a several-stage step-rocket, will be UHF radio-controlled and will carry powdered chalk and a little explosive so as to make a mark on the Lunar surface. It would not be at all surprising if the authorities were to announce the success of such a flight any time within the next year — although again that decade interval may elapse.

Secondly, within a similar decade or two—maybe longer, a satellite space station will be erected in an orbit around the Earth at a height of perhaps ten to thirty thousand miles! That too is a certainty—technology will permit it! But the step from the unmanned Moon rocket to this space station is indeed a big one. Nevertheless, it is in the cards and the theoretical work for it has all been done. Even if reliance has to be made on the familiar chemical fuels of alcohol

or hydrogen, and oxygen, these things will follow. If only as a military measure the space station is a certainty—and we had better pray that the first one is American!

After a space station has been constructed, manned and is operating with a small shuttle relay of chemical rockets from Earth, the step to the Moon is a neat foregone conclusion, relatively easy. What is even more impressive is that the steps to Mars and to Venus are similarly lightened.

The reason for all this stress on the space station and for all this talk which omits consideration of rockets directly from the Earth,

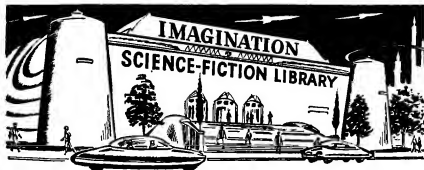
is that the horrible pit of gravity must be breached for a few tens-of thousands of miles by slow painful steps. From then on the Solar System is ours.

As in all beginnings, when the initial effort is made, the results follow quickly. The planets will be attained — not necessarily with planetary landings though!—comparatively shortly after the Space Station is an operating entity.

The planets—when? They are no more than decades away! For all we know, right now the Army may have the unmanned Moon rocket on the boards or in the shops—it can't be farther away than that. Once that step—then space is ours!



"I can't seem to convince this goofy captain of mine that there's no monsters around here!"



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Mark Reinsberg

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review several titles — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

RECENT REPRINTS FROM "FPCI"

Fantasy Publishing Company, Inc., is a Los Angeles firm specializing in reprints of many out-of-the-way fantasy and science-fiction titles which fans are no longer able to find in original book or magazine form.

Among FPCI's recent releases: *Green Fire* by John Taine (\$3.00), is a tale of scientist vs. scientist in the year 1990, originally published in 1928. *Strange Worlds* by Ralph Milne Farley (\$3.00, contains two complete novels— "The Radio Man" and "The Hidden Universe"—dealing with life on Venus and Earth migration.

The Planet of Youth by Stanton A. Coblenz (\$1.50), is a novelette of 1932 vintage, also about Venus. *Fantasy Twin* (\$3.50) comprises two books—L. Sprague de Camp's

"The Undesired Princess," a fantasy about a modern man in the Aristotelian world of Logeia, and Stanley G. Weinbaum's "The Dark Other," an alien-personality story written before the author's literary maturity.

Quadratic (\$3.50) contains four science-fantasy novels, three by Olaf Stapledon, one by Murray Leinster. Of Stapledon's novels, published originally in England but appearing in America for the first time, "The Flames" is about intelligent life from out of the sun; "Death Into Life" concerns a world of the mind, and "Old Man in New World" describes scientific changes which have occurred on Earth by the year 1970. Leinster's "Murder Madness" features another would-be conquest of our planet.

PRIZE SCIENCE FICTION

edited by Donald A. Wollheim. 230 pages, \$3.00. McBride Company New York.

This is the first annual volume of "Jules Verne Award" science-fiction stories. As a collection it is really too good to deserve the taint of deception and impropriety injected by its editor. For Mr. Wollheim has awarded one of the prizes to a story co-authored by "Martin Pearson and Cecil Corwin."

That Cecil Corwin is the pen-name of Cyril Kornbluth, who was given another prize in the same book under his own name, is beside the point. What fans will be interested to learn is that Martin

Pearson is the pseudonym of Wollheim himself.

In other words, the editor has awarded one of the prizes to himself.

Furthermore, of his two assistants on the "selection committee", one is a literary agent, several of whose clients are represented in the book; the other is a name which this reviewer has never before heard of in the science-fiction field.

Anthologists don't get penalized in the marketplace for such unethical practices. But we condemn this shabby trick and consider it a sorry exploitation of the name of Jules Verne.

THE SPACE SALESMAN

by Frederik Pohl and C. M. Kornbluth. 179 pages, \$1.50—paperbound, \$.35. Ballantine Books, New York.

This book belongs in the exclusive circle! It's another one of those all-time best science-fiction novels—in the same class as *The Puppet Masters*, *The Demolished Man*, 1984, and *Brave New World*.

It is a marvellously entertaining story about a not-improbable future in which advertising agencies completely control society. The world is divided into two classes—the despised "consumers" and the highly venerated salesmen of big business.

Hero Mitch Courtenay is an ad-man, a Copysmith Star Class. As leading young executive of Fowler Shocken Associates, largest ad agency on Earth, it's his job to

sell the population on emigration to Venus.

Existence on Venus has essentially the same appeal as living permanently aboard a submarine, yet Mitch is undismayed. He sees it as a true advertising sales test.

But sales resistance is the least of the copysmith's difficulties. His "provisional wife" hates his profession and threatens to leave him. There's sabotage in the market research department. And a rival agency, embittered over losing the Venus account, declares open warfare—literally.

Moreover, there's an underground movement opposed to advertising altogether.

Anyone who's ever considered the power of advertising in present-day life will read this brilliant future satire with absorbed enthusiasm.



Conducted by Mari Wolf

EVERY month the mail brings to the BOX a large pile of fanzines. You see them reviewed here. Some of them are published monthly, some bimonthly, some quarterly. A few are published irregularly, perhaps are only one or two issue affairs. On the other hand one, *Fantasy Times*, is published twice a month and keeps up with the news from all over the science fiction field.

Besides wide differences in the frequency of fanzine publication, there are great differences in content and format. Some fanzines are really "little" magazines—publishing off-trail quality fantasy stories and poetry among stories that really aren't science fictional at all. Some are news magazines. Others are magazines where readers who collect science fiction can get together to buy, sell, or trade. Some publish an especially fannish

type of fiction and articles about themselves and their friends, and others publish nothing but very serious discussions of science and literature and the cross between the two that makes up sf.

You'll find printed magazines, mimeoed magazines, hectographed magazines. You'll find silk screen covers, fine line drawings, and sketches in purple hecto fluid. You'll find just about anything and everything in the BOX—but one thing all the fanzines have in common. They're put out by fans, by sf enthusiasts, by people whose interest in the field of science fiction is active, creative, and given to hours and hours of hard work.

You'll almost never find a fanzine that makes money. It's hard enough to break even. Without counting in any of the editor's time, the supply problem alone makes fanzine publishing an expensive

hobby. Perhaps the fan starts out simply, with a hectograph and a zine limited to a few pages and a small mailing list. He has to buy paper. Hecto supplies. Stamps. Envelopes and more paper for his correspondence with other fans—those whom he wants to write for his magazine and those with whom he wants to trade copies. Quite a few copies he trades. Quite a few sheets of paper have to be thrown away. Perhaps he sells enough to break even on the cost of all materials. Maybe, after a few issues, a little more than enough . . .

What does he do then? Gather in his big profit of two or three dollars an issue? No. He's a fan. He's put out a zine long enough to see what it *should* be like, how it could be improved.

He buys, borrows, begs or rents a mimeograph. Used. (Often badly.)

Perhaps the mimeoing isn't very good, at first. Running the machine takes experience (as even I've found out, turning the handle of the Pacific Rocket Society monster—and I've had to worry about feeding it ink or adjusting it or cleaning it.) But after a few issues the quality of the fan editor's magazine improves. The inking is more even. He and his friends have learned to cut better stencils, and all the tricks of justifying for even margins. Maybe they've put another few dollars into repairs for the mimeo. But it's worth it. The subscription list is getting bigger all the time.

You can see where the process is likely to end. The fanzine gets better and better, bigger and bigger. As material and format improve, the price per copy goes up—

but so does the cost per copy. Eventually the fanzine gets so big and so time-consuming that it's practically a full-time job for the editors to keep it going. It may, like so many other fanzines of the past, become so time-consuming and work-consuming that the editor just can't keep putting it out any longer.

He quits, and that's the end of the fanzine, and a lot of its readers say what a shame it is, that so-and-so quit just when his work got so good.

But other fans, especially those engaged in putting out publications of their own, know just how much work there is in a really fine job. They know it's something you don't do for money. Why do you do it? Mainly for the feeling of accomplishment you get from your work, especially from seeing your work improve. And, of course, for the praise you'll get from others with similar interests and similar goals.

THE fanzine editor is proud of his status. He'll turn out a magazine to the best of his ability, and he hopes you'll like it. Normally, he'll price his zine very fairly. A fanzine priced at twenty or twenty-five cents will be of a certain quality. You might not like the material, or the style, or the policies of the editors, but technically you'll have a pretty good fanzine. A more amateur job, technically, will cost less—maybe ten or fifteen cents. It's almost impossible to publish for less than a dime, though there are nickel fanzines. (Good ones, too.) The fact that a high-priced fanzine is good doesn't necessarily work the other

way. You'll find *very* good fanzines, some of the best in the field, priced down among the lowest. Usually, in these cases, the editor has kept publishing costs down by sticking to mimeographed covers and no more pages than he can afford—and usually he's willing to subsidize his hobby also.

So—even on those fanzines that are willing to send samples, it certainly wouldn't hurt an editor's feelings if you sent him enough to cover the cost of mailing, at least. A few cents won't mean much to you, but your few cents multiplied by a lot of other people's will mean a lot to him. And if you could state specifically that you want only a particular issue, or state that you'll be glad to take the current issue, you'll be helping the fan editor too. Usually you'll find that the new issue is just as interesting as the previous one.

And you'll find too that the fan editor may not be a businessman, he may not be in the publishing business in any professional sense, he may not have the facilities to turn out a real work of art—but he's putting out a product to please *you*, the science fiction reader and fan.

You'll find just about every type of fanzine, as I've said before. Usually you can tell from the way they are reviewed which ones are likely to appeal to you, share your interests. And when you pick out a fanzine, you can read it and enjoy it in the same spirit in which the editor put it out.

Because, no matter what else your fanzine editor may be, he's a science fiction enthusiast. And he works at being one.

Now, to the fanzines for this

month.

* * *

FORERUNNER: published irregularly by R. D. Nicholson at 24 Warren Road, Double Bay, Sydney, Australia. The price of this one is five shillings Australian, no American price quoted. If you like a really good, and rather off-trail magazine, however, it would certainly be worth your while to query editor Nicholson on prices or the possibility of exchanging copies of American sf magazines.

There's almost nothing in the issue I have here that couldn't have been published in a professional magazine. A couple of the stories are the kind you probably wouldn't consider outstanding if you read them in a prozine, but you'd enjoy reading them. And there are others, like Douglas Nicholson's "Young Man of Middle World," that would be tops no matter where. (Editor Nicholson states in his editorial that "Young Man" isn't a reject from any pro magazine. Wonder why he didn't send it out?)

Vol Molesworth concludes a continued story, "Arkaroo," which is a very good example of the monster-from-another-dimension genre and gives a most interesting account of Australian bush life, to boot. F. B. Bryning, Royce Williams and Norma Williams also contribute material to this issue. I couldn't find out who designed the cover, but it too is of exceptionally fine quality.

* * *

TYRANN: 15c; bimonthly: Henry Ebel and Norbert Hirschhorn, 853 Riverside Drive, N. Y. 32, N. Y. As the editors state, "Tyrann is published to lose money and have fun doing it . . ." You can tell that

they and art editor Rich Bergeron have a lot of fun in the doing.

This hectographed zine has well balanced articles on a variety of subjects, as well as multicolored drawings. In the issue I have here there's a special feature—a long article by Charles Allen (as told to Hal Shapiro) on "I Went to Desert Rock."

It's the eyewitness account of one of the servicemen who took part in the A-Bomb tests last year, and it gives a good picture of what goes on before, during, and directly after the test.

Elsberry reviews Luis Bunuel's movie, "The Young and the Damned," and describes some of the symbolism used therein. Sounds very good. And Harlan Ellison writes a story called "Logical Insanity," about what would happen if an alien race made every human being completely logical. It's a cleverly done story, but I don't agree with his conclusion. Even though to live in an emotionless logic would be most unappealing to an emotional creature like man, how could lack of feeling drive him insane? He couldn't go mad, he'd be too logical. Like a thinking termite, or something.

* * *

ASFO: 15c; Jerry L. Burge, 415 Pavilion St., S. E., Atlanta 3, Ga. This issue of the unofficial organ of the Atlanta Science-Fiction Organization says goodbye to editor Ian T. Macauley. Editor Burge takes over a fine fanzine, one where you'll always find good serious articles on science fiction, as well as features in a lighter vein.

Roger Dee gives one of the best answers I've seen yet to the controversy that's been going around

lately as to how much science there should be in science fiction. In "It's Your Baby," Roger points out that the technical stf story and the non-technical or human interest story complement each other instead of competing, and that the field as a whole would lose if either were done away with.

And Joel Nydahl writes on "The Root of All Evil," or why editors publish the way they do, and admits that if he were an editor he'd like some of the green stuff too.

* * *

BREVZINE ADVENTURE: bi-monthly; Warren A. Freiberg, 5018 W. 18th. St., Cicero 50, Ill. This one sells 3/25c, so I guess about a dime for a sample copy would be about right . . .

Publisher Freiberg and managing editor Gerald Kamen put out a good fiction fanzine here. It's by no means straight stf—there are a few short realistic stories mixed in with the fantasies. I especially liked Robert G. Warner's short piece, "The Whisper of Rain," which is very simply the story of the death of a tired old man. I wouldn't call it a fantasy, even if the protagonist does see his dead wife beckoning to him in the rain—just a very sensitive picture of a man's last fancies.

Terry Carr's "The Departure" was also very good. It's the story of a woman waiting for the spaceship to take off and carry her husband away from her . . . But why, pray tell, call this short story a novelette?

Alexander Rothlands writes under his own name and a pen name. They're rather hard boiled stories. Good, if you like the tougher kind. And there are some good illustra-

tions, too.

* * *

SKY HOOK: 15c; quarterly; Redd Boggs, 2215 Benjamin St., N. E., Minneapolis 18, Minn. Sky Hook is one of the FAPA mailing, which means it's a fanzine put out by members of the Fantasy Amateur Press Association. Unlike the majority of the Fapazines, which are circulated only among the membership, this one is available to the general reader. And if you're wondering what an amateur group like FAPA can accomplish, here's a good way to find out.

Jack Speer writes on "Rising Standards," and this time the article isn't about general science fiction. It's about the fanzine, and the way that serious fan writers and editors will seek to improve the quality of their product. He stresses the necessity of having a good looking magazine—one that's well printed, pleasing to the eye, and without typographical errors or glaring grammatical blunders. He also stresses the necessity for care in writing—being sure of facts, being careful to rewrite and improve until the material is as good as the writer can make it.

Also, William Athelin, Jr. in "The Issue at Hand" discusses professional science fiction stories from the standpoint of writing techniques. He especially frowns on the "one punch" story, the tale wherein all depends on one gimmick, usually brought in during the last paragraph. It's an article I can praise whole-heartedly, and a fanzine I'm sure you'll like.

* * *

QUANDRY: 15c; Charles Wells, 405 E. 62nd. St., Savannah, Ga. Lee Hoffman is still the editor of

Quandry, of course, but associate editor Charles Wells will take your money. As for what you're getting for that 15c—well, if you don't know about Q it's obvious that you are a stranger to the world of fanzines and amateur science fiction!

The old gang is all here. You'll find Bob Tucker and Robert Bloch, both being funny so well that their articles are even hilarious to those who haven't been reading Q long enough to be in on all the private jokes. You'll find Irish fan Walt Willis and his comments from across the Atlantic. And of course Lee herself, the really big name Fanne . . .

It's mostly just chatter and informal articles, but you should have as much fun readin' as they do writin'.

* * *

TRANTOR: Robert G. Briggs, 1725 Riggs Place, N. W., Washington, D. C. Editor Briggs and Irene Baron publish Trantor for distribution through SAPS, the Spectator Amateur Press Society. SAPS fanzines aren't for sale, but the editors state that, "While the extra copies hold out, we should be glad to send a copy to any fan requesting one."

It's one of the best looking zines in the BOX this time. The cover is very simple—plain white, with the title Trantor, printed at the bottom. Mimeeing is done on one side of the page only, which is a rather costly practice, considering the extra mailing weight of each issue. But there's no print showing through from the other side of the paper.

You'll find a couple of stories with fans as the main characters. Baron and Briggs can really make an amusing tale out of the doings

of those strange people known as fen. There's Briggs on Conventions, mainly the Chicago one, and the mailbag from other SAPS members. Since it's a part of the mailing, Trantor is really a two man job—and one I think you'll like.

* * *

FANTASY-TIMES: 10c; twice a month; James V. Taurasi, 137-03 32nd. Ave., Flushing 54, N. Y. In the last few issues I've read of F-T there have been some exceptionally newsworthy stories of interest to all who are interested in fandom. There have been four complete Convention reports, covering four different fan conventions—the Westercon in Los Angeles, the Fan-Vet Con in New York, the Australian Convention in Sydney, Australia, and the big annual London Convention. That last especially sounded like a lot of fun. Just wait until the British fanzines come out with *their* reports on it.

In F-T you'll find also all the professional goings on in the stf field. You'll hear about new magazines, new radio shows or TV shows or movies, new books and anthologies. In fact, F-T is your twice a month science fiction newspaper—and if you have any desire to keep up with the field you'll find this periodical most helpful.

* * *

KAYMAR TRADER: 10c; monthly; K. Martin Carlson, 1028 Third Ave. So., Moorhead, Minnesota. Here's a tradezine—a fanzine for collectors, for would-be collectors, and for people who want to sell that pile of 1930ish science fiction magazines up in the attic.

The Trader is a mimeographed zine where for a reasonable price you can list what you want to buy

or sell. Subscriptions are 4 for 25c, or 6 for 25c if you're a member of the National Fantasy Fan Federation. Members of the NFFF also get an advertising rate discount.

If you're a magazine or book collector, why not look here?

* * *

FUNZINE: 20c; Paul Wyszkowski, 129 Lawton Blvd., Toronto 12, Ontario, Canada. Funzine, the Carefree Fanzine, is another newcomer to the ranks of amateur publications. It is a lot of fun, and quite good for a first issue. Among its contents there's an article by the editor about fanzines — what they are, how they're run, etc. Paul divides fanzines into five categories: those with one page missing, those with one page upside down, those with all the pages upside down, those with all the pages missing, and others.

Funzine fortunately seems to fall in the last category.

It's mimeoed, stapled down the middle, lengthwise, to give it twice the normal number of pages. There's some well varied fiction by Dotty Delaine, Delroy Lewis, and Ronald Van Veldt. And interesting fillers by Prof. Ignoramus. The mimeoing is legible but will undoubtedly improve with future issues. Contents —most entertaining. I think you'll like this Canadian zine.

* * *

VULCAN: 15c; quarterly; Terry Carr, 134 Cambridge St., San Francisco, Calif. Terry Carr and Peter Graham put out this mimeoed fanzine which divides itself into sections. There are serious constructive stories, serious constructive poems, fan humor stories, fan humor poems, and features. Good, too.

In the issue I have here there's a special attraction—Van J. Golding's article about Krazy Kat strip, and excerpts from the strip itself which have been released for publication here.

Serious or humorous, fiction, verse or feature, you'll find everything here in this representative fanzine.

* * *

THE MEDWAY JOURNAL: Tony Thorne, 21 Granville Rd., Gillingham, Kent, England. There's no price listed in American money for this fanzine, but if you're interested in seeing a British zine you might send Editor Thorne enough to pay its postage.

The Journal is the club magazine of the Medway Fantasy Club and contains a lot of news about the organization and its members. As a glimpse of how a British fanclub operates it's most interesting.

* * *

QUIS CUSTODIET: 15c; monthly; Jimmy Clemons, 1829 Tamarind Ave., Hollywood 28, Calif. Jimmy Clemons and Art Lynn bring out a lot of fiction in this fanzine. E. R. Kirk's story, "The Bori Giant," is an allegory type tale of present day Earth as seen through the eyes of a visiting giant. Then there's Jay Casey's "Vicious Circle," a short short dealing with the murdering by each other of the last people on Earth. And Don Howard Donnell starts his serial, "Fog," which will run for three issues.

Future plans include still longer stories—up to 10,000 words of one story in one issue. That's a lot of mimeoing . . .

* * *

A LA SPACE: 15c; published 7 times a year; Kent Corey, Box 64,

Enid, Oklahoma. In this zine you'll find articles of special interest to active fans, as well as some fiction. But the articles are, in this issue at least, much better written than the stories.

Orville Mosher writes on "What Does Project Fan Club Do?" If you're starting a fanclub and somehow haven't heard about the Project, you'll be well off to write to Orville for helpful hints and information . . .

Vic Waldrop, Jr writes on 3D movies and science fiction, and he lists stories contemplated for movie production. There are quite a lot of them, too.

* * *

TERRA: 15c; Gilbert E. Menicucci, 675 Delano Ave., San Francisco 12, Calif. Here's a brand new hectographed fanzine, with stories, articles, features, and cartoons. The issue of girls in fandom is taken up with someone on the editorial staff writing "What's Wrong With All-Girl Fan Clubs?" And Maria Cox, founder of the all-fanne club, the Fanettes, writes in their defense. A lively controversy.

Then there's Peter Graham's short-short, "Fright," which is a rather interesting little punch line tale.

I liked the cover too. The alien looking up at all the No Vacancy signs . . .

* * *

That's all for this time. Next month I'll be back, opening up the BOX again. Remember, if you have a fanzine you want reviewed, send it to me, Mari Wolf, Fandora's Box, IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois. Be seeing you!

—Mari Wolf

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Letters

from the Readers

LIBERAL SCOTCHMAN!

Dear Ed: -

Having just finished the September issue of Madge, I thought I'd drop you a line and give my rating. As I'm part Scotch (not the liquid!) I'll class the stories according to how much I think they are worth.

COVER: 5c—Malcolm Smith has always been my favorite artist, especially on rocket ships.

EDITORIAL: 2c—Always good, but could stand a little shortening...

NO SONS LEFT TO DIE!: 5c—A great story but should have been longer.

THE CYBERENE: 3½c—Good.
JABBERWOCK, BEWARE!: 2c—Darn good short story.

LOVE THAT WOO-WOO!: 2½c—Fair.

THE FUGITIVES: 2½c—Kind of mixed up, it seemed.

EMERGENCY RATIONS: 2½c—Good.

SCIENCE FICTION LIBRARY: 5c—That's the best idea Madge has had yet for a feature. But say, WLH, why not write it under your

own name?

FANDORA'S BOX: 4c — Mari Wolf always comes through with the best fan column in America.

LETTERS: 4c—Always entertaining. Glad to see a plug for serials from Ted Hinds. (I'm bound to subscribe sooner or later, too!)

Let's see, the tally comes up to—35c. Looks like I got my money's worth this time!

You know, **IMAGINATION** is the best all-around mag in the business. It has good stories, good covers, and the best features I've seen yet. But tell me, when is **TOFFEE** coming back? . . .

Jim Winters
4592 Juniper
Wichita, Kansas

You've got a unique way of rating the issue, Jim, comparing it to the price you paid. But if our math is correct, your total adds up to 38c . . . so it looks like you really got more than your money's worth, but then, Madge has a habit of doing that. Speaking of your money's worth, you can get each copy for 20c—for details see page 162. . . . Sorry, we don't do the book re-

views so we can't sign our name. Mark Reinsberg, who conducts the column, is an old-time fan, and writer (your editor and he sold their first science fiction story together back in 1938) and among his many activities, Mark is science fiction reviewer for the Chicago Tribune. TOFFEE? The little lady will be back soon—Charlie Myers has recently finished his new novel with

became addicted to stf over a year ago—I'm fifteen now. With me Madge is super cool, crazy man crazy, and real gone! Get the point?

Helene Ulrich

97-39 Eckford Ave.

Ozone Park 17, N. Y.

We think you're super cool too, Helene! with

MOON FLIGHT IS COMING!

SUPER COOL, AND REAL GONE!

Dear Mr Hamling:

Madge is terrific, super-colossal and all other adjectives able to describe the best science fiction magazine ever printed!

For a long time I've wanted to subscribe, but I never got around to it. I'm doing it with this letter, though, since you recently started using serials—can't take a chance on missing an issue!

Please print another TOFFEE story soon. They're superb. My favorite writers are usually Geoff St. Reynard and Daniel F. Galouye. Rog Phillips tells some extraordinary yarns too. Let's see a lot more of these writers.

I also like the cartoons Madge features, and I definitely do not think any of your departments should be discontinued. FAN-DORA'S BOX interests me, even though I'm no active fan. The only other stf addict I know is my girl friend who is a bug on science!

I like Madge's photo covers, and the different length stories each issue. Some magazines have only long stories and serials. I like your short stories especially.

IMAGINATION is the only mag I have bought consistently since I

Dear Bill:

I have just devoured the September issue of Madge. Very tasty indeed, but I fear there are a few things that might cause a slight case of indigestion; however, on the whole this ish was, shall we say, delectable?

That cover by Malcolm Smith was very well done, but as to it illustrating NO SONS LEFT TO DIE! it would take a very imaginative mind to be able to fit that into the story as there was no actual description of the ships or the battles in the story.

Speaking of good material, the inside illo for NSLTD would not fall into that category. It is reproduced by a method fairly new to Madge, but *Galaxy* has been using it for quite some time and it suits them better for *Galaxy* is a lousy magazine!

The lead story, NSLTD was very enjoyable, but seems to me I've read the plot—theme—several thousand times. I seriously wonder if an author will ever come up with a NEW science fiction plot.

You are cruel to animals, Bill, (us!) otherwise you would have given JABBERWOCK, BEWARE—THE FUGITIVES—and EMERGENCY RATIONS to the squirrels! LOVE THAT WOO-WOO

was much better than its predecessor, ALIAS A WOO-WOO (January 1952 issue). I actually found myself chuckling over the yarn.

I wonder who wrote the editorial, you or Ray Palmer? I ask this because Rap is the only editor who comes out and flatly states something is going to happen because he believes it. In your editorial you seem to be very sure that flight to the moon is coming very soon. Your "very soon" I take to mean in five or ten years. I think you are letting your imagination run away with you. Sure, the moon flight is coming, but my guess is it won't be until the turn of the century which is more logical than your guess . . .

Who will finance the moon rocket? Why your government, of course, but how long will it take to convince congress that they should allow several billions of the taxpayers' money to finance a moon rocket? Would 10 or 15 years do it? Some say that if the military went after it they could do it in five. But only if there was a danger of invasion by another power, to beat them to the punch.

It is more logical to assume that the U. S. Government would rather spend several billions on A and H bombs rather than a moon flight. Once the right people have the money they would start research. Then how long would it be before actual ship construction would begin? Five or ten years? And how long would it take to build the ship? They have taken about three and a half years to build an atomic submarine, so at least double that figure for a moon rocket—or space station . . . Then how long to test

the ship?

Like I said, the turn of the century seems the more logical guess . . .

On to other things. Nuts! I'm disappointed—here I thought was one magazine that would not use serials, chopping a story into sections. Serials are junk, tripe, etc. I hate them—do you understand? , , , All this shouting is doing me no good, so I'll just have to put up with lousy serials or stop buying Madge, which I won't do—but the old girl will never be the same!

Fredrick B. Christoff

39 Cameron St., S,
Kitchener, Ont., Canada

The cover for NSLTD was suggested by the story, not actually showing a scene from it. Your comments on our editorial are interesting. Instead of going into a lengthy reply, read our editorial on the same subject this issue. It would appear that our opinion is shared by many people—more qualified than us, certainly, so what do you say now? Serials? Madge is not making them a policy. We tried one, THE TIME ARMADA, because we liked the story—let us know your reaction to it. However, we do feel that if we use serials they should be confined to two parts. That way three isn't a long lag between start and finish. Fair enough? with

NO DESSERT . . . ?

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Each month at the newsstand there are four magazines I invariably purchase. One concerns itself with the news, one with detective fiction, one with fantasy, and one with science fiction. IMAGINATION is the latter.

I can truthfully say that Madge

is the most engrossing, most unique, and most entertaining of the four. To change your style in any way would be suicide!

Therefore . . . phooey! to Mr. Ted Linchitz who had the audacity to suggest discontinuing FANDORA'S BOX, fantasy, and fact features. Perhaps his misguided soul suffers from a monomaniacal hatred for words beginning with *f*.

And double phooey to serials! How would you like to wait a month between supper and dessert? May I assure you that the difference between Part I and Part II is equally agonizing.

But congratulations to you and Malcolm Smith who make a perfect editor-artist team. Include, if you please, Rog Phillips, whose novel, THE CYBERENE in the September issue is an adventure classis.

David Clarke Carlson
103 S. Booth St.
Anamosa, Iowa

No dessert? Sometimes supper can be so satisfying that you wait a few hours—and then polish off the dessert! A serial in Madge will have to be that satisfying . . . with

OPINIONS REQUESTED . . .

Dear Mr. Hamling:

A little less than four years ago I began reading science fiction. During this time, I have, I believe, read quite a bit. I've seen some good magazines, and some poor ones. I've read science fiction for what it is, a new form of literature. I have many likes and dislikes for certain phases in the field. Hardly ever have I expressed my opinions to the variety of magazines on the market.—So here we have an "average fan" of the vast unheard audi-

ence, the trunk of the tree (it seems to me) upon which science fiction is growing. The top science fiction magazines today depend mainly upon the views of silent fandom, for it is mainly this group that lays down its 35c for good reading.

Therefore, we come to the conclusion that since many science fiction editors base their judgment of what the public likes and dislikes solely upon the letters written by active fans, their magazines are likely to sink into oblivion.

I believe then, that an editor should do two things; send out an urgent request for a burst of letters from active and inactive fans so that the faults of the magazine in question can be determined, and also he should check to make certain that it is the wish of the readers and not his own wishes that carry out the dominant policies of his magazine.

This latter point in particular has reference to your magazine. Even you have agreed that what readers you have seem to be mainly against serials. Yet deliberately, you publish a two part serial ignoring the violent protests.

Now on to the letter department. Praises and disagreements come mainly from the active fan groups, who are overjoyed at the sight of their names in print. Inane, and diversified opinions of the various stories seem to be the main topic in your reader section. To me, and many others, I'm sure, it is disgusting to go through the letter column and read practically the same thing over and over. Even many of the writers remain the same, issue to issue, a fact which indicates that Madge is not receiving the number of letters it

should.

You will recall that when *Galaxy* started its career, it depended mainly on the beliefs of the inactive fans, a fact which was indicated by quote, "90% non-letter writers" and only "10% active fans." This burst of letters from "non-letter writers" came as a result that they would be assured, quote, a "concrete vote in the planning of the magazine".

I, myself, have absolutely no interest in how others may or may not feel about a story. It is necessary that you receive their letters but it is definitely not necessary that we receive them too. It is my suggestion that you devote a page or two each issue—to letters of major importance in dealing directly with the magazine itself.

IMAGINATION can still be a great magazine.

Jerome Martin
Hermosa, S. D.

We don't know what editors base their policy on letters from the active fans alone—certainly we do not; but some editors have a fetish for ignoring completely that smaller segment of their readership through exclusion of letter columns, etc. As to Madge's reader department, you will have noted, we're sure, that the "regulars" as you would call them are few in number, and as a matter of fact the bulk of the letters come from "first letter" writers or those who just decided to comment periodically. So in essence our letter department draws more heavily from the "inactive" ranks, and for that reason you will find more story commentary than anything else. As to an editor requesting word from the inactive mass of his readership,

that request in so far as Madge is concerned, has always been a standing policy. The plain and simple truth of the matter is that the so-called "burst of letters" you speak of is a figment, an illusion—it just ain't so! To prove it we hark back to the days when we were managing editor of Amazing Stories and Fantastic Adventures. For five years we watched the volume of fan mail, and at that time AS and FA had the largest circulations in the sf field—AS in particular. The volume was around 100 letters per issue until the advent of the famed Shaver Mystery stories. The volume then increased to several hundred per issue, and Ray Palmer and I always requested letters from every reader! Recently in Madge you will remember we ran a contest with prizes for just a 200 word letter. We received over a thousand letters—a record for any sf magazine for one issue—but still only slightly over one per cent of our readership! So we ask you in all fairness, how can an editor blatantly state that he is formulating the editorial policy of his magazine on the opinion of "non-letter" writers—when he never hears from these people! If he does hear from one per cent, is this the mandate of the other 99?

We try and base our editorial policy by good judgment; we listen to those who write us, but we discount what we hear until sales figures come in on a given policy; this is the voice of that "non-letter" writing audience. If it agrees with the letters, fine and dandy, but if it disagrees, we follow the sales chart; any other course would be bad business since you must please most of the people most of the time . . .

The point is, we're not attempting to mislead Madge's readers; we encourage letters, and we say we will consider what each reader desires—and we do. But always in relation to the sales chart which has a habit of not being wrong! This answers your point of an editor who might be inclined to force his own ideas on the readers. It will work only if the editor's and the mass readers' opinions happen to coincide. Happily, ours do, so it makes our work easier.

To conclude, we would like to see a "burst" of letters, but we'd like to qualify that by deciding what a burst is: we feel a deluge of 50,000 letters—over half the readership to make it indicative—would be a proper yardstick; but we also know that 50,000 readers will not write in! So we're wrong? OK, gang—prove it! But in the meantime we'll keep our eye on the graph which so far is the only word we have from you! . . . with

THE "DIFFERENCE" IN MADGE

Dear Ed:

I felt I had to write to you about NO SONS LEFT TO DIE in the September issue. There's a real story, in my opinion. The main idea, galactic warfare, is a bit old, but Hal Annas put a new twist to it which I liked. Characterization was good, though not comparable to Ellanby's THE STAR LORD in the June issue.

THE CYBERENE by Rog Phillips was also excellent. Maybe it's because I've always liked Phillips' work. JABBERWOCK, BEWARE and THE FUGITIVES were fair for shorts, but EMERGENCY RATIONS outclassed them. I'm still

not sure about LOVE THAT WOOWOO! The plot was a bit indefinite, and I still can't decide if the "love-mates" were robots or duplicated humans . . .

I agree wholeheartedly with Ted Hinds about serials. What's wrong with them? *Astounding* and *Galaxy* use them, in fact I have subscriptions to both. I'm looking forward to serials in Madge.

In looking over Ted Linchitz' letter, I made a swift checkup. There will be 40 pages not concerned with stories, all right, IF you include the covers AND the illustrations for stories. Who wants a mag without illustrations, and who would buy a magazine with a cover filled with type?

For quite a while I've been aware that Madge is different from other mags, such as ASF and GALAXY in a subtle way. It puzzled me, but I've defined the difference. The words for it come right from you in the September issue. Madge is a well-rounded magazine. That's it. Nearly all the others have too much of this, or too much of that. Madge has everything in perfect proportion. Keep up this fine balancing job.

Barry Miller
74 Vulcan St.

San Francisco 14, Cal.

Your analysis of Madge agrees with ours—and the sales chart. Guess that is it! . . . with

SOUTH—DEEP SOUTH, SUH!

Dear Ed:

I've been reading Madge for about two years and I've got a complaint to make. I haven't read every issue of Madge, but in the ones I have there have been comparative-

ly few letters from the South (The Deep South, that is). Surely you get enough letters from the South to publish more than you do! (You don't want to start the "War" again, do you?)

Now that I've had my gripe, I would like to say that Madge is about the best source of good stf that I can find. I could go on and on about the qualities of Madge, but I feel sure that they have been adequately expressed for me by other more active fans, so I'll leave the discussions to them.

I haven't met a female fan in the overall duration of my science fiction adventure; I wonder if there are any female fans in the Jack-

sonville area. I would like to correspond with other stf fans too—male and female, so take note, Madge fans!

Keep the cartoons no matter what. And thanks for a swell magazine.

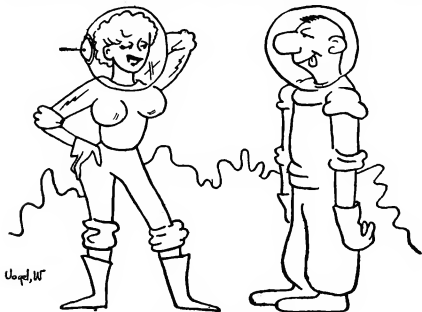
Pfc. Larry G. Poss

1350125 USMC

MAD NATTC Brks 571

Jacksonville, Fla.

Somebody, uh say somebody, finally wrote in from the South—the Deep South, that is. Suh, we're pleased to have you aboard. Where all are the rest of you Confederates? Don't let our Yankee address scare you! . . . Which about winds up this issue. See you next month, gang wllh



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TOMORROW'S SCIENCE

HALLEY'S COMET: Periodic visitor to Earth vicinity, this stellar "fireball" will return in 1985. By then man may witness spectacular event from space ships! Space flight is coming—as suggested in **THE COSMIC JUNKMAN**—see page 6.

Another scan
by
cape1736

